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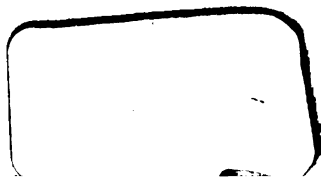
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To Freddy
from Arthur

THE HERONS' TOWER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A SECRET MISSION

A FOREIGNER

THE LAND BEYOND THE FOREST

THE EXTERMINATION OF LOVE

JOINT-AUTHOR OF

REATA

BEGGAR MY NEIGHBOUR

THE HERONS' TOWER

A ROMANCE

BY

E. GERARD

(EMILY DE ŁASZOWSKA)

METHUEN & CO.

36 ESSEX STREET W.C.

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THE HERONS' TOWER

CHAPTER I

LUITGARD'S BIRTHDAY

" By virgin forests girt around,
Adorned by turrets grey,
Pfeilhofen stands, that castle proud,
The subject of my lay"—

HERE the grey-haired family retainer, who was reading aloud this ballad from off the pages of a tattered leather-bound volume, paused and glanced suspiciously over his spectacles.

" Pfeilhofen stands, that castle proud,
The subject of my lay"—

he repeated with stronger emphasis than the first time. "Is your graciousness attending to me?"

The pale, fair-haired child thus addressed as "your graciousness" merely nodded in reply, without removing her dreamy gaze from the open window. The old man continued—

" Here years ago dwelt Eberhard,
A knight of passing fame ;
Two sons had he—young Wilibald
And Konradin by name.

Knight Eberhard had yet a niece,
The gentle Leonore ;
Young Wilibald he loved her well,
But Konrad loved her more.

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Young Wilibald, for Leonore,
 Would ride the livelong day,
 To seek for her an eagle's wing
 Or bind a posy gay.

But Konrad would have paid his life
 A single smile to gain,
 Or save the gentle Leonore
 But one short hour of pain.

When he had reached threescore and ten,
 Good Eberhard, quoth he,
 'Choose now, fair niece, which son of mine
 Shall plight his troth with thee.

Mine eyes grow dim, more slowly beats
 My heart within my breast,
 And fain my grandson would I see
 Ere in the grave I rest.'

Then turning to the eldest son,
 The maiden, blushing bright,
 Bestowed on handsome Wilibald
 Her hand so lily white."

Here the pale child interrupted the narrator with a question—

"Bitterbalg, why did Leonore give her hand to Wilibald and not to Konrad if he loved her best?"

"Why?" returned Bitterbalg severely. "Why, just because she was foolish, I suppose, like all young people, who rarely know what is good for them. Not but what Count Wilibald was a noble gentleman, and might have made her happy, only it turned out different."

"How did it turn out?"

"If your graciousness would only let me finish the ballad without constantly interrupting," retorted the old man aggrievedly, "you would hear how it turned out. Listen—

"'Sweet brother,' spoke then Wilibald,
 'In thee will I confide;
 Be thou, when I am o'er the seas,
 The guardian of my bride.

A holy vow doth bid me go
 To Palestine away,
 And kneel beside the Saviour's tomb
 A year and yet a day.'

Said Konrad then, 'Dear brother mine,
 Let not thy heart be sore,
 For with my life will I defend
 Thy gentle Leonore.'

'And if thou wilt defend my bride,
 Swear by the holy rood
 To venge her wrongs, whate'er they be,
 With thine own broadsword good.'

Young Konrad swore, 'Who brings down woe
 Upon her gentle head,
 Shall pay it surely back to me
 With life blood rosy red.'"

At this juncture the old man laid down the book in order to give more point to the pause between the first and second part of the ballad; when he deemed the interval sufficiently effective he resumed—

"Who flies on milk-white charger there
 So swiftly o'er the wold?
 A dauntless hero knight there rides,
 Young Wilibald the bold.

And who behind on pillion sits
 In robes so quaintly rare?
 The beautiful Zelmira 'tis,
 That Turkish maiden fair.

O faithless knight! O faithless knight!
 Where is thine honour fled?
 Thy manly grace is little worth
 If knightly faith be dead!

Fair Leonore upon the tower
 Watched for her love's return,
 And when she spied her Wilibald
 Her cheek began to burn.

But soon it paled—for she has marked
 That he is not alone:
 Down from the heights she threw herself,
 And died without a groan.

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Spoke Konrad then beside the corse
 Of gentle Leonore,
 'I faithful, brother, guarded thee,
 As by the rood I swore.

False Wilibald, it is thy crime
 That now she here lies dead;
 Then draw thy sword, the price to pay
 With life blood rosy red.'

'Stay, brother Konrad, list to me!'
 'Nay, words can nothing mend;
 Not words but iron here must speak;
 To God thy soul commend!'

In deadly strife the brothers closed;
 It was a direful sight!
 And what the words refused to mend
 Settled their rapiers bright.

Cried Konrad, as then Wilibald
 Fell lifeless in his gore,
 'Thus, brother, have I kept to thee
 Yon sacred oath I swore!'

"Konrad was right to stab Wilibald for being faithless,"
 said the pale child thoughtfully.

Bitterbalg looked at her reprovngly.

"Then your graciousness seems to have overlooked the first
 line of the twenty-first verse—

'Stay, brother Konrad, list to me!'

Wilibald wanted to say something to his brother, only Konrad
 did not give him time to speak."

"What did he want to say?"

"The ballad will tell you, if you will only pay attention—

"The Turkish maiden wrung her hands,
 And tore her raven hair;
 'Oh, rash and cruel youth,' she cried,
 In wildness of despair.

'Learn that thy brother mourned as dead
 His fair bride Leonore,
 Deceived by tidings false that came
 To Palestine's far shore.

LUITGARD'S BIRTHDAY

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I long had loved the stranger knight,
But deemed my love was vain ;
At length my faithful heart prevailed
To heal his bitter pain.

A nobler knight than Wilibald
Was never born nor bred ;
Now hast thou slain a guiltless man,
His blood be on thy head ! ”

The pale child now looked distressed.

“Poor Wilibald ! Then he was killed by mistake ? ”

Bitterbalg smiled grimly, evidently pleased with the effect he had produced.

“Wilibald was not dead,” he remarked after a pause.

“Not dead ? ”

“No, not dead. He was left lying on the floor of the Herons’ Tower ; for it was there that the duel took place. On the naked boards of the large room below where they fought there is still a dark stain to be seen—Count Wilibald’s blood, probably.”

“Will you show it to me ? ” asked Luitgard, with very wide-open blue eyes.

Bitterbalg made an impatient gesture.

“There is nothing to see, nothing to see at all,” he said, with the air of a person who had said more than he meant to betray. “Perhaps it is not blood after all. Well, as I was saying before, Count Wilibald was not dead after all ; for when he was raised up it was found that his heart had not yet ceased to beat. The Turkish lady devoted herself to him, and, thanks to her care, he was eventually restored to health.”

“And did he forgive Konrad for having stabbed him ? ”

Bitterbalg answered her question by another.

“Has not Countess Luitgard observed that on the large painted family tree in the dining-room the branch breaks off short after the name of Konrad ? ”

“Yes ; why is it so ? ”

“Because Konrad was never heard of again, and no one

knows what became of him. Believing his brother to be dead, he mounted the white charger which was standing by the side of the lake, and disappeared."

"Is that the end of the story?" asked Luitgard.

"That is the end of Count Konrad's story, for nothing more is known about him. Most probably he killed himself in a fit of remorse. And Wilibald, who was now the last of the Pfeilhofen race, since old Count Eberhard had died during his son's absence in the Holy Land, soon after these events married the Turkish lady Zelmira, and lived with her for several years; but she was not happy in our German country, and pined after the warm sun of her own land. She used to spend most of her days in the Herons' Tower, which she had arranged according to her outlandish fancy, and there she used to lie on a couch surrounded by all sorts of foreign animals."

Luitgard looked interested.

"What sort of animals, Bitterbalg?"

"Why, just animals," returned the old man testily. "How should I know what sort of creatures they were exactly? Maybe they were monkeys, and maybe they were elephants; it does not matter which. Paganish animals they were for sure. So she pined away and died, and then Count Wilibald took another wife, a German lady, who was your great-grandmother."

"And what became of the monkeys and elephants?" asked Luitgard, whose fancy had been strongly impressed by this detail.

"Monkeys and elephants?" asked Bitterbalg, not at once comprehending. "Oh, the outlandish animals you are meaning! Why, what should have become of them? Pined away and died too, most likely."

"And what is there now inside the Herons' Tower?"

"Books, books, books; just such books as this one here," he said, touching the leather volume he held in his hand. "Your great-great-grandfather Eberhard had arranged it as a library."

"But nobody reads the books now," said Luitgard.

"No," said Bitterbalg, "and nobody will read them either, for the door has not been unlocked since the day Count Kuni was carried to the grave."

"But why," persisted Luitgard, after a little pause, "why is the Herons' Tower always kept locked, Bitterbalg?"

"Ha! Why?" said Bitterbalg sharply. "Because the gracious countess so commanded; and if she orders me to burn down the whole tower as it stands, I shall do it just as well. You must not ask such childish and useless questions, Countess Luitgard, or else I shall read you no more family ballads. Do you see that gap in the castellated battlement over there?" he added, as though anxious to change the subject, and pointing out of the window to the grey tower just visible over the tree-summits across the park.

Luitgard nodded, as was her frequent custom of answering questions.

"That is the spot from which Leonora threw herself down. It is called the 'Maiden's Leap.'"

"How brave she must have been!" said Luitgard, gazing up dreamily at the castellated tower, round which the swallows were swiftly circling.

"Hum," said Bitterbalg. "Of course the bride of a Pfeilhofen, and his own cousin to wit, should be brave. Bravery and Pfeilhofen mean much the same thing; and, thank God, we have had no cowards among us yet. But Damsel Leonora was rather too hasty; if she had waited five minutes longer she would have learned that Wilibald had not been really false to her. It was certainly foolish to lose the chance of being Count Kuni's great-grandmother by her imprudence."

"I suppose so," said Luitgard, not quite understanding. "Then she would have been my great-grandmother as well, would she not, Bitterbalg?"

"Yes," returned the old servant somewhat disparagingly, "though it is not likely the thought of that would have kept her from throwing herself over the tower. There's small pride indeed in being great-grandmother to a girl, or grandmother or mother either, if it comes to that."

Luitgard hung her head, and played for a minute with the ribbon at her waist.

"Bitterbalg," she said at last, "would it have been better if I had died instead of Kuni?"

"Better! Why, it would just have been the fortune of the Pfeilhofen house," said Bitterbalg, with a wintry smile. "'Tis a hard thing to say to a child who has hardly seen the light, but if it had been your graciousness whom I had to lay into the little case instead of Count Kunibert, I think I could have done so with a cheerful heart. Heigh-ho! 'Tis just nine years to-day. Most likely Count Kuni would have been mounting his pony, and I would be cutting his first switch from the hazel bush beside the moat. There would have been feasting and rejoicing enough to-day at Castle Pfeilhofen if he had lived. Three hundred yeomen would have been banqueting in the great hall, drinking his health in strong ale and sparkling mead. Ah, 'tis a mortal pity indeed that it was your graciousness that lived instead!"

Luitgard made no answer to this somewhat strange speech; she seemed to have heard similar speeches before. All the details of the family history were not known to her at that time, but she knew enough to be aware that her existence was a mistake, and that her duty to the Pfeilhofen name would have demanded that she should die in place of her twin brother Kunibert.

And in truth it was difficult to deny that, from a Pfeilhofen point of view, Luitgard would have done better to close her eyes upon the world almost as soon as she had opened them. Her father had been an only child, the grandson of that same Wilibald von Pfeilhofen of whom we have already heard, and at the same time the only surviving male bearer of the name. Together with young Othmar was brought up his cousin, Hedwig von Pfeilhofen, the orphaned daughter of a younger brother of his own deceased father. Being himself of a gentle, yielding disposition, Othmar, from tenderest childhood, grew into the habit of being swayed by the girl's superior spirit and energy. The blood of the Pfeilhofens and their stubborn

pride seemed far more alive in her than in him, as also the attachment to the home in which she had grown up was more passionate by far. Othmar's father had died while he was yet a boy, and his mother marrying again had permanently removed to the residence. As soon as he had attained his majority, Othmar made to his cousin a proposal of marriage, which, however, met with a prompt and unconditional refusal.

"Then I shall become a monk," Othmar had exclaimed in the first impulse of disappointed love on hearing Hedwig's decision.

But his cousin had endeavoured to show him the folly of such reasoning. Was it not his most sacred duty to marry and have heirs, in order to continue the long and glorious line of the Pfeilhofens? A Pfeilhofen had no right to bury himself in seclusion. And, moreover, he must make a brilliant marriage that would secure for him the alliance of other influential houses—a marriage in every way more brilliant than a union with his beautiful but portionless cousin would have been.

"But I know of no other woman, I care for no other," he exclaimed helplessly, when the argument had been presented to him. And verily it seemed to him impossible that he should live by the side of another woman. Life without Hedwig would scarcely be life at all.

"Go out into the world and seek for a bride," she had said imperiously. "Form an alliance that will raise the house yet farther. There is no connection, even a royal one, to which the Pfeilhofens may not aspire. Make your choice among the wealthiest and highest-born maidens of the land."

"But you are the fairest," he said again.

"'Tis not for you that I am fair," she answered drily. And in truth Hedwig had a second equally strong motive for refusing Othmar's suit. The weak and vacillating character of her cousin had no charm for this proud and headstrong girl, whose heart had long been given to another, Wolfram von Winkelried, the scion of an ancient but impoverished house. No acknowledgment of love had as yet passed between them, and there seemed small prospect of an ultimate union; but youth is ever

sanguine, so Hedwig hoped and waited, feeling it impossible to wed another so long as Wolfram was free. How long she might have waited is a question she was never called upon to decide, for it was decided for her by Fate on the day when she learned that her lover had, surrendering to his father's desire, betrothed himself to another wealthier maiden.

Othmar, meanwhile, still undecided, and smarting under the mortification of Hedwig's refusal, met with an accident which in one moment altered the tenor of both their lives.

Being out hunting one day in the forest near Castle Pfeilhofen, he was attacked by a furious mother boar accompanied by her two cubs, while his weapons were out of reach and his huntsmen out of hearing. On the tree beside which he was standing at the moment of the unexpected attack, was suspended a wooden crucifix, and in the flurry and trepidation of the moment he breathed the vow which had been lying dormant in his mind ever since his cousin's refusal, swearing to abandon the world and take the cowl if he were saved. By what seemed almost like a miracle, two of his dogs rushed up at that moment, and with their assistance he killed the boar.

On reaching home, Othmar's first act was to seek out his cousin and tell her of his danger and of his vow. Hedwig felt a blank despair come over her as she listened, for the fulfilment of his vow meant nothing less than the extinction of the family. Were both their lives, then, to be a failure? Was there really no means of saving the Pfeilhofen name from extinction? Yes, there was one way; but for a moment she almost doubted her own courage to accomplish it, so exceedingly distasteful was it to her fastidious spirit. It was sharpest agony to have irrevocably to renounce that dream of happiness that had become part of her being; it was deepest degradation to think of herself as tied for life to a man whom she could neither love nor admire. But she knew her personal influence over Othmar to be unlimited, and that for her sake alone he would be willing to break his rashly uttered vow. Was it not her manifest duty to save the family from extinction? And surely

upon her rather than upon her weak, helpless cousin devolved the responsibility of worthily representing the Pfeilhofen name. Love had failed her, but that was no reason why ambition should be renounced.

These conclusions were quickly put into practice, and Othmar, in the delirium of his happiness at Hedwig's unexpected surrender, suffered his vacillating conscience to be lulled into silence, each tardy scruple as it awoke being stifled anew by the ingenious arguments and yet more by the dexterously administered caresses of his beautiful cousin.

So they were married, and within a year twins, boy and girl, were born to the young couple; but this eagerly expected event did not bring all the anticipated joy. It was generally understood among the neighbours, that the event had been unduly hastened by some agitation or fright occasioned to the young mother, and it was further rumoured that this fright had in some way been connected with the Herons' Tower, standing on the island by the little lake at the end of the park. It was there that Hedwig had suddenly been taken ill two months before the expected term, and there, upon the selfsame couch formerly occupied by the beautiful Zelmira, she had given birth to Luitgard and her brother. Both children were extremely delicate; the girl survived, but the boy lived only for a few hours. Hedwig never recovered her health, but became a confirmed invalid for life; nor had she another child to replace the son she had lost.

Under these circumstances, it was unavoidable that one of two things should happen. Either the bereaved mother would take to her heart the one child that remained, and love her with all the more yearning tenderness because of the terrible price she had cost; or else something akin to loathing would take the place of affection.

With Hedwig it was the latter which occurred. From the moment when they told her that the boy was dead she could scarcely bear the sight of the girl; and as years passed on, and no other son was given her, there grew up in the mother's heart some feeling too active to be called

indifference, too passive to be called hatred, and for which, perhaps, resentment would have been the most fitting expression. Was it for this pitiable result that Hedwig had renounced all chances of happiness, and tied herself down to an unloved husband? She had sacrificed herself for the glory of the Pfeilhofen name, and lo! the Pfeilhofen name was no better off for the sacrifice than if Othmar had taken the cowl. The name would die with him, and the family escutcheon be broken on his grave as the last of the Pfeilhofen race.

Such were the circumstances which shed a cold blight over Luitgard's childhood, and thus it came about that her conception of the word "mother" was that of some awful distant deity, whose will was law, whose decrees were irrevocable, but whose heart was ice.

Othmar himself, though he loved the delicate, fair-haired child, loved her in a secret, almost guilty fashion, which brought little brightness to Luitgard's solitary childhood. It was almost as though he felt himself disloyal to Hedwig by admitting to himself that he loved his daughter. The house, which in former times had been gay and lively, sank gradually into the dead repose of a cloister. The gates, now so seldom opened to admit a visitor, grew rusty about the locks and hinges; the paths, so seldom trodden save by Luitgard's tiny feet, were covered with grass and dead leaves; the water in the old moat dried slowly up, and flakes of moss grew upon the steps which led to the entrance door.

So while her mother 'passed her days in a darkened chamber, and her father divided his time between music and hunting, Luitgard for companionship had but the choice of her canvas ancestors on the walls, or of her marble ancestors in the family vault.

Twice a week an aged priest came from the neighbouring village to say mass and at the same time to instruct Luitgard in history and catechism. This, together with reading and writing, which she had learned from Bitterbalg, and needle work from old Walpurga the housekeeper, composed the sum of Luitgard's knowledge. Likewise once a year the dowager

countess, Othmar's mother, would come from the Residenz, fully three days' journey, in a lumbering yellow chariot, in order to spend what she termed "a month's penance" in the country. With these exceptions, Luitgard never saw another face nor heard another voice but those of her parents and of the servants, grey and wrinkled men and women, grown old in the service of the Pfeilhofen family.

In winter the unswept paths were so deep with snow that she seldom was able to leave the house; but in summer time she was free to roam unchecked from morn to eve through the large, neglected park, till she could have found each turn blindfolded or in the dark. But her favourite haunt was the vicinity of the Heronry, where on a little island, surrounded by a surface of sullen green water, stood the gloomy, half-ruined old building that went by the name of the *Reihersturm*, or Herons' Tower.

CHAPTER II

KUNIBERT'S DEATHDAY

WHEN old Bitterbalg's long-winded stories had at length come to an end, and he had hobbled off in pursuit of some domestic duties, Luitgard remained rooted to the spot, plunged in deep and perplexing thought. She was standing by the open window, but though her eyes rested on the scene without, she did not see how the golden sunshine was gilding and adorning all things in nature, from the little white pebbles on the gravel walk to the young buds on the old horse-chestnut trees; she did not hear how the birds were calling to each other in the ecstasy of reawakened love; she did not even listen to her own little bird, which from its wicker cage suspended on the ivy creeper was making its first attempt at a weak, uncertain chirrup. Her thoughts were all with her dead brother, and her mind was busy painting out the picture of what might have been had Castle Pfeilhofen been celebrating his ninth birthday to-day.

"How handsome, how brave, how clever Kuni would have been, and how I should have loved him! I might have been allowed to drink his health to-day; and perhaps" (this more doubtfully) "I might have stroked his pony if it were not too big; and perhaps"—But no—she broke off these pleasing reveries with a start. "It would not have been like that at all; for if Kuni had lived then it would have been I who would have died, and who would now be lying in that little black case."

Poor child! It did not even occur to her to think that there might have been room enough in that large, dreary castle for

both brother and sister, and in a mother's heart sufficient love for two children. She had as yet far too little self-assertion to have expected any gifts or pleasure because it was her birthday, but nevertheless she was conscious to-day of a greater void in her life, a stronger yearning than usual for someone to love her.

From amid the accompanying chorus of birds' voices other sounds detached themselves presently, floating upwards to Luitgard as she stood by the window. The room where she was standing was just above the music chamber where stood the old spinnet. It was her father who was playing, and letting herself be drawn by the soft, seductive tones, never heard without delight, she glided down the turret stairs and entered the room on tiptoe. Othmar looked up with a smile and a careless nod as his little daughter entered.

"I have no time for you now, child," he said, hastily but not unkindly, laying one hand on her head, while the other still ran over the keys.

"I shall be quiet," said Luitgard, "I shall listen." And for some minutes she stood immovable, drinking in with dreamy enjoyment the sounds which her father alone had the secret of wringing from the well-worn keys of the old spinnet.

The walls of this room were hung round with portraits of the unmarried daughters of the house of Pfeilhofen, those that had not been wedded, or had died in early youth. Luitgard loved to examine and to speculate upon these vanished relatives; but the one which interested her most hung straight above the spinnet. It represented a young girl in the German costume of the middle of the seventeenth century, seated before this very same instrument, with her hands on the keys. The face, which was half turned over her shoulder at an angle of peculiar grace, showed a pair of dark blue eyes, with a look of melancholy, almost of wildness in them, and the corners of the small mouth had a despondent droop. The jewels on her neck and arms, the mother-of-pearl keys of the spinnet, even the notes of music on the sheet before her, were painted with an almost

pre-Raphaelite minuteness, but the painter had found only room for one verse of the song which she was supposed to be singing. The words—

“Oh, have you seen my own true love?
Oh, have you seen him ride
Upon a charger milky white,
His falchion by his side?”

were clearly visible on the painted sheet, and on a scroll above her head was inscribed—

LEONORA VON PFEILHOFEN,
Born 1640; died 1659.

“Father,” whispered Luitgard, during a pause in the music, “what is that you are playing? I have never heard it before.”

“I have been trying to make out that old thing,” he said, smiling half impatiently as he pointed to the picture above the spinnet. “Provoking that only six bars of the music are here. I have been working at it for half an hour at least, but I cannot get it to my mind”—and again, after touching off what was visible of the song, Othmar relapsed into some wandering improvisations of his own.

“Yes, what a pity there is not more of it,” said Luitgard. “I should like to know the rest of the words.”

“It is not the words that I am seeking,” said Othmar wearily. “But I cannot make out whether the whole of it is to be played in a minor key, or whether it changes into the major later on.”

“Father,” she said again, some minutes later, “father, now I know why Leonora was so unhappy. Bitterbalg told me all about it.”

But Othmar only frowned impatiently at the interruption, and showed no feeling for the luckless Leonora's sufferings. His interest in his forefathers was of a purely musical nature, and to his mind, had he dared to speak the truth, by far the most noteworthy man of the race had been a certain Oswald von Pfeilhofen in the sixteenth century, who had composed a whole volume of religious chants and a particularly fine requiem

mass. His daughter was making him lose the thread of his inspirations by her childish prattle, so he said fretfully—

"Go away, child, to your grandmother; I have no further time for you just now. I must practise this modulation, and presently Gottschalk will, I fear,—that is, I hope,—be coming with a report from the forest. So go away, child; go away."

And Luitgard went away, her head still full of the dead Leonora's story and her ears still filled with the music as she walked down the corridor to her grandmother's room.

The dowager countess—upright, carefully dressed, and in an excellent temper with herself and the world—was seated in a deep window embrasure busied with some elaborate piece of feminine handiwork.

"Kiss me, child, but mind you do not crush my ruffles," was her greeting to Luitgard. "Tut, tut, that will do! It would be a pity if they were spoiled; the dear duke is never tired of admiring their cut! Oh! he understands dress, the grand-duke," and the dowager countess, having smoothed her frills with loving care, returned to the marshalling of her needle and embroidery silk.

"So Bitterbalg has been puzzling your head with more of those silly tales," she observed disapprovingly, when Luitgard reported the story she had just heard. "Well, well, there was a time when I was mistress of this house, and then Bitterbalg had less to say than he has now."

"But I like the story. How brave poor Leonora must have been!"

"Or how foolish," said the dowager, with an airy but cultivated laugh. "It would have been more sensible if she had married Konrad and lived comfortably to the natural end of her life."

"Grandmother," resumed Luitgard presently, "this evening when we go downstairs I shall show you Wilibald and Konrad on the family tree, and how the branch breaks off after Konrad's name."

"No thank you, my child," laughed the old lady, with a pretty little mock shudder. "I never could endure that

musty old tree up there. None but a Pfeilhofen would have had the harebrained idea of painting his pedigree on a ceiling, for everyone to see the ages of his wife and daughters. It is lucky that the hall is so high that it cannot possibly be read without danger of dislocation to the neck. Besides, there are fully more cobwebs growing on it than coats of arms. Cobwebs on a ceiling! What can Bitterbalg be about? Well, well, there was a time when I was mistress of the house, and there were no cobwebs then! Ha! How gay the place used to be! How the horses pranced and pawed the ground before the house! How the music used to re-echo in the halls! I made a ballroom of Castle Pfeilhofen; your mother has turned it into a tomb. I could not stand it for more than a month at a time, and that only as penance for my sins. It will be like getting out of the grave when I roll away in the carriage to-morrow."

Luitgard had been standing till now immovable beside her grandmother's chair, following with her eyes the movements of the dowager's nimble fingers, and watching the flash of her rings as she worked. She now came a step nearer and suddenly flung her arms round the dowager's neck.

"Grandmother!" she cried, "do not go away and leave me alone!"

"Tut, tut, what is this?" said the countess, somewhat flurried at the danger to her frills. "Leave you alone? As if you could be alone, with a father and mother to take care of you! A fine thing indeed it would be if I were not to be back at the Residenz on Easter Day for the court reception! For what would I have ordered my new brocade, I wonder? And what would the dear grand-duke say were I not there to break an Easter egg with him as usual?"

Luitgard did not say a word further; she withdrew her arm from her grandmother's neck as suddenly as she had placed it there, and remained standing silently by the table. The good-natured dowager seemed vaguely aware of some change in her granddaughter, for she hastened to add—

"But I shall come back again next year, you know. When I have been gay and wicked for eleven months I do not mind

being dull and pious again for once by way of a change. And a year is not a long time, child, though a month sometimes is," she added, with a sigh. "Come, child," she went on a little later, desirous of changing the subject, as Luitgard still remained silent and unresponsive. "Would you like to have some of my chocolate pastilles? I got them from the dear duke. And here is a bobbin of pink embroidery silk which I do not require, as the colour is too pale. And by and by you must show me that pretty bird which you have got in the cage before your window. It is beginning to sing, is it not?"

At this Luitgard looked up and smiled.

"Is it not pretty, grandmother? I found it under the very last chestnut tree in the avenue. It must have fallen out of its nest, I think. I am going to love it so and keep it all my life."

"And what is its name?"

"I think I should like to call it Leonora. And oh, grandmother, do you think it will get to know its name and eat out of my hand some day?"

Before the dowager had been able to hazard an opinion, the heavy oaken door was pushed open and Bitterbalg looked in.

"The gracious countess desires to see Countess Luitgard," he announced, after having first cast a critical glance over the group before him—the light and airy grandmother, the pale and serious granddaughter, here engaged in talk.

This moment was to Luitgard the most terrible one in the whole day: her eyes seemed to grow larger and her lips tighter as she turned and followed Bitterbalg.

Once only in the course of the twenty-four hours was she summoned to her mother's room, to go through the ceremony of putting her lips to the ivory white hand which was extended towards her and of answering a few conventional questions ere being dismissed again with a formal gesture. She was always conscious of a sense of relief when, the doors being closed behind her, she knew that for another twenty-four hours she was free from the gaze of those terribly clear blue eyes, which, even in the most indifferent glance swept over her, seemed to read the bottom of her very heart.

The room was darkened with curtains of faded green silk, which shed a sort of ghastly light over everything. The oak-panelled walls were bare save for a single large painting hanging there alone with a wreath of dead flowers at its base. This painting represented a new-born infant swaddled in costly laces and stretched upon a satin pillow. The closed eyes and waxen pallor of the face showed that the picture had been painted after death. On a scroll below, surmounted by the crown and arms of the Pfeilhofens, were inscribed the words—

“KUNIBERT VON PFEILHOFEN: Born 10th April 1721; died 10th April 1721.”

In this whole large room there was nothing which struck the attention like that picture on the wall. The spirit of that dead baby seemed to hover over the place.

“Who is there? Is it Luitgard?” asked a clear, cold voice, which pronounced the words with a sort of frosty distinctness.

On a deep-seated arm-chair, with its back turned to the window, sat the invalid countess, wrapped from head to foot in costly clinging shawls of deep black hue. Little else could be distinguished in the uncertain green light save the waves of her lustreless ashen-blond hair, a pair of piercing blue eyes, and the large miniature brooch that clasped the shawl round her throat. A closer examination would have shown that this ivory miniature was the exact reproduction of the painting on the wall. There was the same dead baby's face, the same emblazoned arms, even the same inscription on a tiny scroll.

“Is that a blue ribbon at your waist?” asked the countess, as soon as the formal greeting had been gone through.

Luitgard mechanically untied the ribbon, scarcely even wondering why she was to do so.

“Do you not know that this is the anniversary of Kunibert's death? I can see no colours to-day.”

“I—I forgot,” faltered Luitgard, with a blush of shame.

The day that Kuni died was the day on which she was born,

but it seemed to Luitgard quite natural that it should be a day of mourning and not of rejoicing.

"That will do," said her mother, with a gesture of dismissal. "No—stay a moment," as Luitgard rather hastily reached the door. "Is that a bird which you have in a cage before your window?"

"Yes."

"I can stand no bird's song in this house. Its unseemly twitterings disturbed me this morning while I was reading the dead psalms. Let it fly—do you understand?"

The blood mounted to Luitgard's face. For a minute she stood rooted to the spot, while a thousand eloquent appeals seemed thronging to her lips, and yet all she managed to utter was—

"May I not keep it?"

"I told you to let it fly," said the countess, in the same measured and painfully distinct tone of command. "Do you not understand?"

"Yes."

Luitgard shut the door and went straight to her own room. Here, without any hesitation, she walked to the window, took down the cage, and opened its wicker door. She neither kissed nor stroked the little bird to say farewell to it; she seemed to be acting as though still under her mother's eye. The bird, rendered awkward and cramped by captivity, did not immediately fly off. Luitgard took up a piece of stick and pushed it almost roughly off its perch, until at last it fluttered out into the sunshine. Her lips were very tightly closed as she watched the departure of the bird which she had meant to keep all her life; but there were no tears in her eyes.

When the bird had quite disappeared, she left the house and ran as fast as she could through the park, never drawing breath until she had reached the spot where on a little island, in the midst of a stagnant pond, stood the solitary grey building that went by the name of the Herons' Tower, only to be reached by means of a rustic wooden bridge fast falling into decay.

It was always to this place that Luitgard came when any storm had shaken the monotony of her dreary existence; a child of silence and solitude, she loved to carry her joys and her griefs to hidden places, there to brood over them unseen. There were no witnesses here save the moss-grown statues and the stiff, immovable herons perching on the topmost branches of surrounding pine trees, yet Luitgard dashed her hand almost fiercely across her cheek as she felt a warm, heavy drop steal down it. In some indistinct way she told herself that since she had been too weak to fight for the bird she cherished, at least she should be too proud to weep over its fate; then, feeling impelled to hide herself and her grief yet more securely from all possibility of observation, she crossed over on to the island, and threw herself down in the flowery grass surrounding the lonely tower.

It was not often Luitgard ventured across the bridge, whose rotting boards were scarcely safe even for her light weight; being, moreover, overgrown with slimy green moss that made footing insecure, and with several large gaping holes at places where a board had fallen in. But excitement to-day overpowered all other feelings, and having reached this secure hiding-place, she pulled off her hat and let the wind blow on her face; for she was flushed and heated, still half wondering at herself for having, even for a moment, ventured to question her mother's command. That tremulous "May I not keep it?" appeared to her now as an act of insane rebellion, which she had dared to perpetrate she scarcely knew how. Confused thoughts and yearnings were heaving in her heart. Oh, why had Kuni been so cruel as to die? Why was it not she who was lying in that little black case to which Bitterbalg was so fond of alluding?

But by and by the peaceful calm of the place began to steal over her, and the burning grief of half an hour ago seemed already a far-off thing; and now, as the fresh April breeze streamed over her face, roughing the plaits of her fair flaxen hair, it seemed to Luitgard all at once as though countless eyes were looking up at her from out the grass. The

wind had blown the blades asunder, and myriads of patient purple eyes were fixed upon her. With a cry of pleasure she threw herself upon them—

“Violets! the first violets!”

She clutched at them, she tore them up, filling her hat and the skirt of her dress with the perfumed flower-heads. How many there were of them, more than enough to make quite a thick wreath like those that hung in the chapel!

Luitgard paused in her violet-gathering and passed her hand across her forehead as she often did when thinking. An idea had suddenly entered her head. Why should she not make the violets into a wreath which might hang, not in the chapel, but at the foot of Kunibert's picture? The old flowers were long since faded, and how lucky it was she had that bobbin of pink silk in her pocket. Yes, she would do it—the wreath should be her birthday offering to Kunibert.

In the engrossing occupation of violet-binding Luitgard spent an almost happy afternoon. The construction of the heavy garland was no easy task for nine-year old fingers, but the intensity of desire bestowed strength to overcome all difficulties. Hours flew quickly by, and only the lengthening shadows of the tall pine trees encircling the outer edge of the pond gave notice of approaching evening. No sound was to be heard but the occasional faint rustle of Luitgard's white dress and now and then the leap of a frog from off the bank into the water. Sometimes, too, one of the sentinel herons, emboldened by her immobility, would swoop down on to the grass, not twenty yards from where she sat, to carry off something in its beak, some grub or lizard presumably, to be leisurely swallowed with much apparent enjoyment.

The sun had already sunk quite low, and the pine-tree stems were painted with ruddy bronze streaks as Luitgard rose from her seat on the moss-grown steps of the tower, breathing a long-drawn sigh of relief and satisfaction.

“Surely, surely Kuni will be pleased,” she said to herself, as she hastened along the arched arcades of the horse-chestnut avenue. “And perhaps mamma”— She did not finish her

thought aloud, but some indistinct yearning, which might have been underlying this impulse all along, now took shape in her mind. Might not this violet wreath prove as a sort of peace-offering between herself and her mother? Might it not perhaps bring some milder light into those cold blue eyes before which she trembled? some warmth to that icy kiss, which at long intervals was pressed on her forehead?

Some such vague notion floated through Luitgard's mind as, laden with her fragrant burden, she re-entered the house in search of some messenger to convey the offering to her mother's room; for she never dreamt of entering it unbidden.

She peeped into the stillroom, but old Walpurga was not there.

"Bitterbalg! Bitterbalg!" she then called aloud. Her clear, childish voice resounded along the vaulted passages and came back to her in wavering echoes, but there was no other answer.

She could hear the faint sound of her father's spinnet in the distance, and still it was Leonora's song that he played; but she did not think of disturbing him again.

Slowly on tiptoe she stole down the long gallery which led to her mother's room, and paused at the door.

The door was ajar, for old Walpurga had but lately entered it, and was now engaged in the inner dressing cabinet, dusting the shelves and putting medicine phials into order.

Luitgard, peeping in, saw only her mother slumbering in her arm-chair, which now was turned towards the window. The yellow light streaming in from the casement fell straight upon the invalid's countenance, showing it, in repose, softer and younger looking than Luitgard had ever seen it before. The stern folds of that marble brow were now all relaxed, the coldness of the pale blue eyes hidden away 'neath the shrouding lids; while round the mouth, usually so hard and stern, there played something almost like a smile—the smile, it might have been, of a happy mother who holds a beloved child in her arms.

Oh sweet deceiver, sleep, who sometimes thus gives us back our lost treasures for brief fleeting moments; and yet no deceiver,

for is not the belief of possession while it lasts identical with possession itself?—the bliss we enjoy during the short ecstasy of a dream as real as the agony which returns with the moment of waking?

Luitgard, unable to guess at the cause, could only see that her mother looked softer, fairer, and sweeter than she had ever beheld her in waking moments. Such a mother might love her, she told herself; such a mother could never look at her with that freezing coldness of gaze; those smiling lips could not speak hard, cruel words; and, emboldened by these thoughts, she crept softly into the room. Suppose she were to hang up the violet wreath under Kunibert's picture, where her mother could see it on waking? And a moment later she was carrying out her ambitious project.

The picture hung almost out of her reach, and the wreath was heavy and unwieldy; but there was a high tapestry chair alongside, and so, cautiously moving it to the place required, Luitgard prepared to fasten her offering.

The withered garland of last year's roses was removed, and fell rustling to the ground, the bleached petals flying into dust. How much fitter to adorn the beloved image were these sweet purple flowers, redolent of perfume and fresh with dew. No wonder that Luitgard felt a little justifiable pride as she admired her handiwork, and her heart beat fast with joyful anticipation as she scrambled down again from her seat.

Might not, oh, might not her mother perhaps be softened into recalling the sentence of banishment pronounced on the bird? Luitgard felt sure that she would find it again, for she had seen it settle on a low shrub near the moat, and with its clipped wings it could not have flown very far.

Moving incautiously in her excitement, the chair slipped against the polished oak floor, and the countess awoke.

"Who is here?" she called; for the deep shadows which enveloped that side of the room where Luitgard was standing, showed only confused outlines but no colour.

"It is I, mother," said Luitgard, moving within the circle of yellow daylight, and using the unwonted name almost bravely.

"Luitgard, you here!" Hardly roused to full consciousness as yet, the tone betrayed more astonishment than anger, and Luitgard was still too much under the influence of excitement to feel the customary awe of her mother. Eagerly she cried out—

"Yes, it is I, mother! I brought a fresh wreath of flowers for Kunibert's picture. I made it myself all by myself—nobody helped me—and I thought—I thought"—

She stood now close to her mother's arm-chair, and the rays of the departing sun streaming through the narrow window touched her head, turning her fair hair into a golden halo. The two little white hands were tightly clasped together and the blue eyes very wide open. Unconsciously, she was pleading her cause more eloquently than any other could have done for her; unbeknown to herself, she was urging her right to a mother's love, for her place in a mother's heart. And who knows whether she might not have won the day, have carried by storm the heart she was besieging? Who knows what might have been? It wanted but a word more, a single touch, to break down that unnatural barrier; one moment more, and mother and daughter might have been locked in each other's arms, henceforth to be no more divided—but it was not to be.

And that it all turned differently was nobody's fault—not the fault of the innocent child, who had gathered the flowers in ignorant unconsciousness; scarcely the fault of the unfortunate woman, who had allowed her grief to jaundice her feelings and pervert her reason. It was nobody's fault at all, or at least it was only the fault of the violets. If instead of these treacherous, deceitful flowers the wreath had been woven of sober ivy, or even of humble daisies, it would have been strong enough to bind together two human hearts; but, being violets, they only made the estrangement more complete, the breach more unfathomable.

For a full minute Hedwig gazed at her daughter in amazement, hardly recognising her in this totally new and unexpected light; then in a low, uncertain voice, quite unlike the frosty precision of her usual tones, she began—

"A wreath for Kunibert's picture. And you made it your self, you say? Is it really?"— Then breaking off suddenly, a violent shudder passed over her frame, and she added in a shriller key—

"What perfume is that I smell?—what flowers are those you brought?" And she craned her neck forward, trying to distinguish the details of the wreath which hung black and opaque against the carved picture frame.

"They are violets—the first violets," said Luitgard wonderingly.

"Violets!" The invalid's voice grew sharp and strained. "Unfortunate child, where did you gather them?"

"I—found them in the grass near the Herons' Tower," faltered Luitgard, now thoroughly scared, but rooted to the spot from sheer terror.

"Near the Herons' Tower! Good God! And you dare hang these cursed flowers by my Kunibert's picture! Cruel, impious child! Do you want to remind me of all I have suffered?" And with delirious energy she found strength to rise to her feet and drag down the heavy garland from the nail where it hung. "Go away—go away," she continued, standing in front of the picture and holding out an arm as though to defend her dead baby against an enemy. "Leave me, I say."

The countess tottered and then fell back exhausted in her arm-chair, and old Walpurga rushed in, to find her mistress in a dead swoon.

It was weeks before she recovered from this attack, and months before she would consent to see her daughter's face again.

"You must have been mad, child," said Othmar, "to have thought of bringing violets to your mother! Violets of all flowers! and of all places gathered at the Herons' Tower!"

"But why? I don't understand," stammered poor Luitgard.

"Why?" said Othmar. "Why, because that spot is the

scene of our misfortune; because the evil genius of the Pfeilhofens lives within those walls; because it was there"— But here he broke off, as though regretting having said so much.

Luitgard was far too much cowed by this time to venture to ask what an evil genius was, and how her father knew that it lived in the Herons' Tower; but these allusions sank deep into her mind, to be often pondered over.

"Violets!" said the dowager, in airy consternation. "Why, child, do you not know that your mother cannot stand the sight or the scent of a single violet, let alone a whole regiment of them? Everyone has got a pet aversion, and violets just happen to be hers. Now, my chief aversion is new-mown hay; that is why I cannot bear to live in the country."

"Violets!" muttered old Bitterbalg, while sweeping away the disgraced flowers down the corridor, removing the last traces of them with an energy as vicious as though directed against a swarm of poisonous vermin. "Violets indeed! I think your graciousness might be contented with one death in the family caused by violets, and not seek to murder the countess mother as well!"

Luitgard attempted no further self-justification. Since everybody was agreed in regarding her as a criminal, she began to think that she must be so indeed, only she did not know the name of her crime.

Next morning she found a little heap of bloody feathers lying near the moat—all that remained of her cherished bird—and at her next visit to the Herons' Tower she discovered that the bridge connecting the island with the rest of the park had been removed by her father's orders. Henceforth she was cut off from the spot as utterly as though it had been an island in the Pacific. Often she used to stand on the opposite shore gazing wistfully across at the sombre grey tower, which year by year grew more weather-beaten and ruinous; but eight whole years were destined to elapse ere Luitgard had again an opportunity of revisiting the island.

CHAPTER III

DELIUS

LUITGARD had reached her seventeenth year when an event took place which shook to its very foundations the calm monotony of her life. Until then the years had passed unnoticed and unmarked by outward change, to all appearance one exactly like the other. Sometimes the snow lay a little longer, or occasionally the summer thunderstorms were unusually violent; but that was all. Her father seemed to grow busier every day, and her mother more of a confirmed invalid. Bitterbalg was shorter than ever in speech and more reproachful in tone. Year by year, and almost day by day, the old man mentally followed the progress of Count Kunibert's development had he but lived. It was always, "Ah, Count Kunibert would have been taking his fencing lesson," or else, "Maybe he would have killed his first boar." The only thing which would put the old man into perfect good-humour, and make him forget Count Kunibert for a time, was when Luitgard asked leave to look at the collection of seals which were his special pride. He liked to make a favour of so doing, and Sunday afternoons was the only time considered good enough for this aristocratic species of entertainment.

Left thus to herself, it was not strange that Luitgard should brood over the stories of the past and grow more familiar with the names of her ancestors than with those of the people about her. What wonder? They lived for her, and had lived for her ever since she could remember; the air seemed full of their voices, the very stones talked aloud of them. Their deeds were

recorded in marble or granite, and their faces were painted on canvas. They spoke to her in her night-dreams ; they hovered round her in her day-dreams, nodding and whispering and laughing or weeping in the breezes that swept the old trees that had seen it all. Here it was that her ancestor Gunther had been killed by a fall from his horse ; there, beside that very tree, her great-grandfather Willibald had plighted his troth to his second wife. Their names could even now be descried cut side by side in the shining bark. She was of their very blood, a Pfeilhofen from both sides of the house. Small wonder, therefore, if, brooding over these tales, the child should grow up dreamy and silent ; that in this enforced loneliness her soul grew deep and her nature intense.

Gradually, as she passed into maidenhood, a new phase crept over her. The society of her dead forefathers seemed no longer sufficient. Vague, uneasy questions as to whether life held any other meaning than what she had yet discovered in it, filled her mind. Strange, unknown sensations would make her heart throb when no cause of excitement was visible, or bring tears to her eyes when she knew of no reason why she should weep. "What is it ?—what is it ?" she would ask herself wonderingly.

It was nothing but the repressed instinct of love, cut off from its natural outlet, and now panting and suffocating for an object whereon to lavish itself. She went about her usual ways unconscious of the brooding fire within her, conscious only of a strange dreamy yearning, of a thirst which she knew not how to quench, dimly guessing that somewhere in the world the remedy must exist, but knowing not where to seek it.

Luitgard had grown very beautiful in these years, but her beauty was not of the kind which could ever take the world by storm. Its peculiar character and almost super-refinement of type made it of that kind which must always remain caviare to the general. The face, though exquisitely youthful in its outlines, had neither the bloom nor the roundness of early youth ; the complexion was of a flawless pallor, without a shade of

colour on the cheek, the lips but faintly crimson, the hair of that rare pallid fairness that painters have sometimes been bold enough to call green, and which looked as though sunlight filtered through tremulous green foliage was for ever playing about its silky coils. The figure was gracefully moulded and elastic in motion, but in its very elasticity there was a trailing languor characterising her every gesture and movement.

Why was Luitgard so pale? Was it because the narrow, deep-set windows of Castle Pfeilhofen let in so little sunlight? Because the old trees in the park cast such a heavy shade on the neglected paths? Or was it another sort of sunshine she lacked?

Deprived of natural affection, her heart might have been likened to a receptacle filled with combustible material, there allowed to accumulate unnoticed, and which perforce must be struck into flame by the very first spark that approached it. Whose hand would throw this spark? Ah! who would throw it? It was upon this chance that hung the weal or woe of Luitgard's life, her happiness or her misery.

There came a day in April which brought the answer to this question.

The seventeenth anniversary of Luitgard's birthday had been preceded by an unusually stormy night, one of those fierce, unbridled storms which usually come to us in March, and which from being delayed, only come with greater violence at last.

As always, the 10th of April was a black day at Castle Pfeilhofen, the mourning for the dead heir having in nowise been lightened as years passed on. The chapel walls were all draped in sable hangings, and a requiem mass had been celebrated there earlier in the day.

"Graf Kunibert would no doubt have received his first gun to-day," remarked Bitterbalg, as Luitgard opened the front door to escape the sense of oppression which brooded over the house.

The frantic violence of last night's wind had now subsided

to a gentle moaning among the trees, like a penitent weeping over yesterday's crimes. And verily there was cause for weeping here; for had not the unkind storm, in its senseless fury, destroyed every beautiful thing upon which it had been able to lay hands? The spring had been an early one, and but yesterday morning the fruit trees had been glorious with a wealth of blossoms, white and pink and delicately lilac. But their glory had vanished over night; pink and white petals lay strewn all over the gravel, or had been caught up in the meshes of rank growing grass.

And even stronger things had fallen a prey to this short-lived outbreak of fury, for here, right across Luitgard's path, lay a broken-off branch of horse-chestnut upon which the gummy glistening buds were beginning to unclothe, and there, a little farther on, was a nest with broken eggs on the ground.

It was towards the Heronry that Luitgard bent her steps to-day, and, as she approached the place, she was conscious of noticing every detail of the surroundings with a sort of magnetic distinctness. It was almost as though she were seeing the spot for the first time, an instinct perhaps, or the presentiment of some great event about to break in on her life. The uneasy feeling of nameless yearning was weighing her down more oppressively than usual to-day, maybe only the result of having lain awake most of the previous night listening to the wind howling round the turret where she slept. "What can it be?" she vaguely questioned herself as she walked along.

The Herons' Tower was so placed that it appeared in sight from the end of the short avenue which led to it, but not so the water wherewith it was surrounded; and only on reaching the very edge of this silent pool did one become aware of its existence. A dense circular belt of pines made a gloomy frame to the picture. On the topmost branches of these lofty trees a colony of herons had once been established, and the few survivors that now remained of the erst flourishing settlement could usually be seen at most hours of the day

perched stiff and immovable against the blue sky, their long necks bowed in that deeply dejected fashion peculiar to herons. The ground here was perfectly flat, and between trees and water a gravel walk had formerly run all round the edge of the pond ; but it had now all but disappeared, and the wooden piles which formerly supported the bridge could scarcely be discerned in the green and slimy water.

Often during the last eight years had Luitgard stood and gazed across at the tall grey tower which lay so close and yet so far away. For despite, or perhaps because of, the bad odour supposed to hover over the place, it had for her an irresistible fascination, yet further enhanced by the impenetrable seclusion in which the tower now stood since the removal of the bridge eight years ago. Not only were the doors and windows kept locked and bolted as before, but the very island itself had become inaccessible, save to the frogs which lived in the water, and to the herons, whose food they were. The pond was small and the island large in proportion, so that scarce twenty feet of shallow water lay between it and the mainland ; yet these twenty feet constituted for Luitgard an insurmountable barrier, and the idea of attempting to overcome it never even presented itself to her mind. She was content to stand on the opposite shore and gaze across at the enchanted island, wondering what secrets were hidden away within those grey walls, and noting how, year by year, the statues became enveloped in moss and ivy, how the faded green shutters were more thickly swathed in spiders' webs, and how the grass and nettles around grew ever denser and more luxuriant.

She knew every aspect of the place at each different season ; how in the midsummer days the emerald green surface was transformed into a ballroom for all the dragon-flies in the neighbourhood, animated turquoises which rivalled the rankly growing forget-me-nots in intensity of hue. She marked how the pine cones used to be thickly strewn beneath the trees in autumn time, how in earliest spring the water was swarming with myriads of tiny black tadpoles. But it was in April that she best loved to come hither, in order to catch a glimpse of

the wealth of violets over yonder in the grass. There were violets growing elsewhere in the park, but these were pale and scentless compared to those other purple flowers which grew so tantalisingly out of reach, and which, since that memorable birthday, had acquired for her the fascination of forbidden fruit. Sometimes the breeze would waft across a whiff of exquisite perfume from off the enchanted island. Such a whiff came to her just now as she stood at the water's edge. Mechanically she walked round the pond, reviewing the army of purple flowers which seemed to mock her from over the water. Suddenly she stood still with a cry of wonder, for the opposite side of the pond presented to-day an unwonted appearance. The path was interrupted at one point, for a tall pine tree—the largest and most ancient—felled prostrate by last night's storm, lay stretched across the water, forming a natural bridge between the island and the mainland; for while its roots still partially clung to their former place in the soil, its summit rested on the stone steps of the building itself. The tree in falling had hit against one of the ivy-wreathed statues, which now lay broken on the ground alongside.

Timidly Luitgard measured the space across the water with her eyes. Would she have courage to avail herself of this improvised bridge, seemingly placed here expressly for her benefit? She hesitated, for the trunk looked slippery and deceitful; but then the violets wafted such an intoxicating perfume, and twinkled their purple eyes at her so irresistibly. A minute more and she had walked across, and stood within the magic circle.

The long-coveted flowers were once more within her reach, and, like a famished person seizing upon food, she threw herself upon them. For eight long years she had been condemned to fast, and now she was holding a sort of violet orgie, revelling in their colour, and surfeiting herself with their perfume.

Luitgard's hat was very soon filled to overflowing, and yet the violet ranks seemed in nowise diminished.

"I must return to-morrow with a basket to gather the rest," she reflected, as she wandered back to the house, taking care to cover up the flowers with a handkerchief for fear of meeting old Bitterbalg.

"I must return to-day," she said to herself a little later, as she made the discovery that she had left her long gauntlet gloves lying on the island. It would never do to leave them to be soaked there overnight on the damp, dewy grass.

It was late in the afternoon when Luitgard again walked across the prostrate pine tree. She walked quite steadily this time, without fear of slipping; for experience had made her bolder during the two previous journeys, and she had seen that the rough, rounded stem afforded a firm footing, and did not even bend beneath her slender weight.

As she now stepped on to the island for the second time, she had something of the feeling of a queen taking possession of a newly found kingdom, and she looked around her, desirous of making or renewing acquaintance with all its objects and inmates; for in her violet rapture that morning she had scarcely had leisure to notice other details.

There were two doors to the tower—front and back—and to each of these led a flight of a dozen steps whose balustrades were adorned with dilapidated statues and crumbling stone urns placed there alternately. The vicinity of the water and the deep shade cast by the pines made the spot so damp that urns and statues were coated over almost uniformly with wrappings of thick green moss. It was this dampness which had shod the naked feet with velvet sandals, which had drawn velvet sleeves over bare arms, pressed velvet masks on stony faces; and here and there the ivy had stepped in to complete scanty draperies with its luxuriant festoons.

Luitgard passed her hand down the massive folds of the figure nearest to her, and stroked the velvet mantle which was so soft above and so hard beneath. She vaguely wondered whether people in the world outside the park—for she knew, but as yet hardly realised, that such a world existed—ever wore velvet garments like those? Then she passed on to the second

figure, to examine the texture of its draperies likewise, when her outstretched arms sank to her side in boundless surprise as her eyes fell straight upon a figure scarce half a dozen paces from where she was standing.

It was a man who lay stretched in the grass, bedded, as it seemed, in a couch of purple violets, with here and there a clump of pale primroses among them. He was lying so that she could only see the back of his head, which was covered with waves of black hair; and as he lay he held dangling in the air one of the long gauntlet gloves which Luitgard had come in search of. He was turning it over and over, letting it drop and picking it up again, putting it half on to his hand and then pulling it off, toying with a certain freakish grace with it, not unlike the movements of a kitten playing with a ball of knitting wool.

Luitgard held her breath and stood still. If she had been nine years old instead of seventeen, she would probably have asked herself, "Is this the genius that lives in the Herons' Tower? And has he come out of it at last?"

But no; her father had said that the genius was an evil one, and surely this vision (she did not know what else to call it) before her could have nothing in common with evil? Though she could not see his face, there was something in the grace of his form and of his motions which touched her as absolutely strange and new, and at the same time as delicious to watch.

If she had been convinced that he was simply a man, she might possibly have felt afraid; but it seemed to her on the whole more probable that some supernatural being had come down from the skies, than that a man should have found his way into the park. Even had he been the evil genius she had heard of, she would scarcely have been afraid. She was familiar with such ideas; it was only men that were strange.

It was evident that he had not heard her approach, and her presence remained unperceived until, putting out her hand against the balustrade beside her in order to lean forward and

gaze still closer, a large flake of mortar detached itself from the crumbling stone balustrade and fell rattling to the ground.

Then he turned his head quickly, and seeing a beautiful pale girl watching him with wide-open blue eyes, leapt lightly to his feet.

"I have been waiting for you," he said, coming a step forward, as a brilliant smile broke over his face. It seemed to Luitgard like a smile of welcome.

She went on gazing at him without replying; if she had spoken she could only have said—

"Nay, it is I who have been waiting for you all these days, all these years. And now at last I know for what I have waited."

Small wonder if Luitgard stared at the vision before her; not only because of its beauty, but yet even more by reason of its exceeding strangeness, unlike anything ever seen or dreamt of.

All the eyes she had hitherto beheld, either in living men and women, or in the pictures of her ancestors, had been blue or grey, but those that were now looking straight into her own were black and bright as ripe brambles touched by the sun. Black likewise of the same intense hue were the soft dark rings of hair circling about the low, straight forehead, which, in an almost unbroken line, joined on to the delicately chiselled nose. The skin, of a pure bright olive tint like that of palest bronze, was full of suggestive vitality, betraying the blood which coursed beneath it to be hotter, swifter, and fiercer than is wont to be the case under our pale northern skies; while the perfect harmony of those lithe young limbs could only be compared to the untaught and unfettered grace of some wild forest animal.

If Luitgard had ever seen a statue of Antinous, she might have been reminded of it, or of a youthful Apollo.

But there was yet another cause for her amazement beyond the mere beauty of his features; it was the same thing which had at first struck her in his movements and figure even before she had seen his face. There was in them some quality or

element utterly new and unknown to her; she had never seen anything of that sort before, save on the faces of some few among her ancestors on the walls, and in her own face as reflected in the mirror.

This element, though she knew it not, was simply his youthfulness. Of all the living faces she had ever yet set eyes upon, her mother's was the youngest; but all youthful element had long since fled from those features worn by sickness, and from that hair prematurely bleached. Her father was forty, and the family retainers at Castle Pfeilhofen were all grey-haired men and women belonging to a former generation; thus Bitterbalg had lately celebrated his seventy-second birthday, Gottschalk the forester was but three years his junior, while old Walpurga the housekeeper had lost her last tooth this winter.

Luitgard did not blush as she met his gaze; she knew of no reason why she should have blushed, and yet he was gazing at her with an intensity quite as great and yet totally different from her own. There was something in the girl's look that was not quite shyness, something in the man's expression that was scarcely audacity, as these two young creatures stood thus, each lost in wonder at the other's beauty.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked at last, standing still some paces from her; and now she noticed that his words had a strange, slightly foreign accent about them.

"Oh no!"

"Will you give me your hand?"

She gave it readily; she was glad to do so in order to assure herself of his reality, and suffered her hand to fall into his as though it were its natural place, content to let it lie there, and with no thought of withdrawal even had he held it for hours.

He gazed down smilingly at the marvel of delicacy he held clasped between his fingers.

"I knew it would be so. This is your glove, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Do you know of what I was thinking when you came?"

Then as no answer was forthcoming, he continued—

"I was thinking that the hand which this glove fitted must be small as that of a fairy. I could not get my own hand into it, and yet few women have a glove which I cannot wear."

She withdrew her hand as he said this and looked down thoughtfully at his own. They were long, well-shaped hands, smooth but not helpless, more elastic than soft.

"The glove must fit you easily," he said, after a pause.

"Oh yes."

"Do you never say anything except yes or no?" he asked, with a shade of impatience.

She raised her eyes to him in wonder.

"Why should I?"

Her manner seemed to puzzle him. He almost thought she must be a little wanting in intelligence, but he did not push the question further just then.

"Will you not sit down here on the stones?" he said; and then Luitgard sat down on the moss-grown steps leading to the door of the tower, while the young man leant on the moss-grown statue alongside and looked down at her.

"Did you come here to gather flowers?" he said, glancing at the violets in the grass.

"I think so," returned Luitgard, passing her hand over her forehead. She could not at all remember the object for which she had come hither, it all seemed so far off now.

"You have not told me your name," said the stranger gently. "May I not know it?"

"I am called Luitgard von Pfeilhofen," said Luitgard slowly and uncertainly, as if she were not quite sure of her own identity. Luitgard von Pfeilhofen was a poor forlorn child whom no one loved, and who loved no one; while this Luitgard who sat here was a queen taking possession of her kingdom, from which not even the king was wanting.

"Ah, then, so this is the park of Castle Pfeilhofen," and the stranger looked about him with interest. "I have heard of it before. And do you always live here?"

"Of course," said Luitgard, opening her eyes rather wider.

"But not all alone?"

"I am always alone."

"But have you not got a mother?"

"She is always ill."

"And a father?"

"He is always busy."

"And sisters?"

Luitgard shook her head.

"Or brothers?"

"I have one brother—Kunibert von Pfeilhofen."

"How old is he?"

"He is dead. He died the same day when he was born."

"Ah!" said the stranger, "I understand now."

He was beginning to catch a clue to the strangeness of her manner, and with this new light thrown upon it he scarcely wondered now that she should be able to say little more than yes or no. The wonder was rather that she should talk at all.

"And you have no friends either?" he pursued.

"Oh yes, a great many."

"A great many? But where do they live?"

"Some of them are on the top of those trees," she said, pointing to the stiff, immovable herons that stood sentry above them, "and there are many others all over the park, golden orioles and nightingales and cuckoos; and now that I can reach the island again, I shall have ever so many new friends to visit," she added, laying her hand on the statue nearest her.

He stared at her face for a moment, then broke into a melodious laugh.

"But they are nothing but stone and moss, and the others are dumb animals. Would you not like to have a real friend—one who is alive and can speak to you?"

"Yes, I should like that," she said, flushing like a child to whom a real wax doll has been promised.

"Will you have me for your friend?"

"Oh yes," she said readily.

"But you have not asked me my name," said the young man, after a pause. "Shall I tell it you?"

"If you like," said Luitgard, although the idea had not occurred to her before.

"You can call me—Delius." There was a scarce perceptible hesitation before the name.

Perhaps he had expected her to make some remark or comment on his name, for he now asked—

"Do you not like it?"

"Yes, I like it," said Luitgard.

"But I do not like yours," said he. "Luitgard, Luitgard. It does not fit you at all. I shall not call you like that—I shall call you Luita. It suits you much better."

Luitgard stared at him in amazement. How clever he was, as well as how beautiful! No one had ever thought of calling her Luita before.

All this time it had never entered her mind to wonder how he came here, now that she knew him to be a man and not a spirit. The stranger himself seemed surprised at her want of curiosity, for he observed—

"Why were you not afraid when you saw me? Did you not think it might be a robber?"

"Oh no!"

"Shall I tell you what brought me here?"

"If you like."

"It was a bird."

Luitgard only stared.

"A little grey bird—one of your friends—and which in this country you call a nightingale. Do you love to hear it sing? Have you ever crept through the bushes to listen to its note? Have you ever stood holding your breath in the moonlit forest, while every leaf, every blade of grass all around were trembling in the ecstasy of the melody?"

Luitgard, looking up at her companion, saw with surprise that his whole expression had changed. The colour had mounted to his cheek; there were even tears shining in his eyes. He must be very fond of music, she thought.

"I swore that I should have a nightingale to sing me to sleep every evening," he continued. "I followed it through the forest since early dawn this morning, till it led me across the wall and into this park. It flew towards this clump of pine trees and disappeared behind the tower, and then I found your gloves lying on the steps."

"You scaled the wall?" said Luitgard, in tones of wonder.

"Yes, why not?"

"But it is so high!"

"If it were twice as high that would not have prevented me as long as I wanted to reach something on the other side."

"And are you going to catch the nightingale now?"

"No, I do not want the nightingale any more. When I found your gloves I forgot all about it."

As he said the last words he had thrown himself down in the flowery grass at her feet, looking up at her through his long dark lashes as she sat there, almost as immovable as the grey statue against which she leant.

The twilight was beginning to gather around them, and outside in the forest there were sounds of rustling animals and the hoot of an owl. The wall that divided the forest from the park was so near at this point that sometimes on summer evenings Luitgard could hear the tramp of a single boar or the scampering feet of a troop of roedeer on the other side.

"Do you come here often?" asked Delius, after a long silence.

"Yes, the heronry is my favourite spot in the park."

"But it is so gloomy here," and he looked around with a shiver. "I like everything fair and bright. My home is all sunshine and dancing blue waves. There are no shadows there."

"The flowers are not dark," said Luitgard, stooping to pick a primrose at her feet.

"No, oh no! the flowers are bright; and for their sake I could almost love the spot," he exclaimed, stretching out his hand with a caressing touch to the flower she had gathered. "Look at the pale, passionate expression of this yellow

primrose, the deep, inscrutable mystery in the violet's eye. I could sit here and look at them for ever."

His voice was trembling again with the same excitement as when he had spoken of the nightingale, and it seemed to Luitgard that he must be fonder yet of flowers than of music.

"Your eyes are like those of the palest violets," he went on, "and they are quite as difficult to read. So you come here often?" he said, relapsing into his ordinary tone.

"Yes."

"Will you come here again this same day next week, and at the same hour?"

"Oh yes, I shall come."

"Then farewell, Luita. I must begone before the night breaks in"—and he rose from his reclining posture. "Will you not say farewell?—for I am your friend, you know."

"Farewell, Delius," repeated Luitgard after him.

He took her hand and gazed at it for a minute with the same intensity as at first, then dropping it suddenly he turned away, and had sprung lightly across the pine stem, to disappear amongst the trees on the other side, before Luitgard had realised that he was going.

She remained sitting motionless on the steps long after the dew had begun to fall and the herons had gone to sleep in their nests overhead, till at last the shrill cry of a bat skimming closely past her head warned her of the approach of night; then, picking up her gloves with sudden haste, Luitgard rose to her feet, and walked home through the fast-gathering shadows.

CHAPTER IV

THE KEY OF THE TOWER

SUNDAY afternoon had come round again, and Bitterbalg, from head to foot attired in smooth black cloth, was seated at a table passing in review his collection of seals. The collecting of seals had been Bitterbalg's one solitary amusement during over half a century. Ever since he had been a small boy who cleaned the knives and boots of the Pfeilhofen family, he had got into the habit of picking up every torn letter cover that came in his way and rescuing its seal from destruction; for, imbued as he was with veneration for the nobility in general, and for the Pfeilhofen family in particular, it pained him to see even the waxen image of a coat of arms thrown carelessly aside to be trampled underfoot. From picking them up he had proceeded to keeping them in a drawer, and from keeping them in a drawer to pasting them on parchment. Once started upon this track, he had followed it up unfailingly, until years had developed this desultory pastime into a harmless mania.

Bitterbalg was of opinion that this occupation, as being aristocratic and refined, was peculiarly suited to the dignity of an ancient family retainer whose forefathers had served the forefathers of his present master. It must, however, be observed that his heraldry, which bore little resemblance to what is generally understood by that designation, was more or less of an original science. While the established principles of genuine heraldry remained a sealed book, and its orthodox expressions conveyed no meaning to his mind, what may be called the Bitterbalgian system of heraldry was replete with

diversion and variety, utterly absent from the cut-and-dry science it assumed to be. Bitterbalg had the history of each single seal at his fingers' ends—the history, that is to say, of how each separate seal had come into his possession, whether received as a personal gift, or begged as a boon, or else carefully cut out of some flung-away letter. He would even be able to relate exactly what the weather had been like, whether there had been snow on the ground or thunder in the air, when he had received such and such an impression which, for its size or clearness, he valued as one of the gems of his collection. But as to judging of the antiquity or precedence of different blazons, or deciphering the colour of an emblem or the motto below a crest, these were mysteries whereto Bitterbalg's studies afforded no clue.

One broad fundamental distinction he made by separating all his seals into two divisions: those which were quartered with the Pfeilhofen crest—to wit, three arrows proper upon a field gules—and those that had been denied this privilege. In bygone times the Pfeilhofens had intermarried with some of the highest families of the land, and more than one Kunigunde or Irmentrud von Pfeilhofen had carried the emblem of the three arrows into other houses. It was therefore not infrequently that Bitterbalg had the satisfaction of recognising "our arrows" upon some foreign seal, and it was evident that such families took rank in his mind in exact proportion to the amount of arrows wherewith Providence had blessed them.

Since the house had become so quiet Bitterbalg's opportunities of enlarging his collection had grown much scarcer. Cessation of intercourse naturally brought about a diminution of correspondence, for, having themselves forgotten the world, the Pfeilhofens were not unnaturally forgotten by it in return. The richest time of seal harvest had always been when the countess dowager had been staying at Castle Pfeilhofen for one of her occasional penances, for at such times the weekly post-bag was wont to be well stocked, and Bitterbalg's periodical hunt in the paper-basket used to yield

most pleasing results. But Othmar's mother had given up coming here at all since the death of her second husband, Count Lilienfeld, which had taken place when Luitgard was ten years old; so now the return had become an exceedingly meagre one, and had it not been for Pater Ludolf, the old priest, who sometimes said mass at the castle, and who good-naturedly would save up any seals resulting from his scanty correspondence, Bitterbalg's collection would long since have come to a standstill.

There was no reason at all why Bitterbalg should not have delighted his heart every day with the sight of his seals; he had very little real work to do; but it had been a long-established custom with him that only on Sundays was the precious collection to be viewed. The occupation was too sacred, the delight too intense, to be wasted upon a mere week-day.

To-day, as he sat before the table and began his weekly review, he cast more than one glance at the door of the room, which he had purposely left ajar in the hopes of securing someone upon whom he could inflict a sight of the seal collection; and just as he was drawing out the last sheet, which he called the Pfeilhofen page, he heard a light step outside, and Luitgard came down the passage.

"Ahem, ahem," began Bitterbalg, audibly rustling the parchment sheets with ostentatious deliberation.

"Did you say anything?" asked Luitgard, stopping short and putting in her head at the door.

"Nothing, your graciousness, nothing at all; I am a great deal too busy to say anything. I shall have to transpose two whole rows of seals this afternoon—hard work indeed!" and he wiped his forehead with an exhausted gesture. "However," he added, seeing that Luitgard was turning away without further remark, "of course if Countess Luitgard is particularly anxious to look at my seals, perhaps I might possibly manage to put off the transplanting till this evening."

Luitgard entered the room and sat down with a sort of dumb resignation at the table opposite Bitterbalg. She

glanced as she did so at the big ticking clock, and saw that she had still some minutes to spare before she was due at the Herons' Tower.

Bitterbalg's grim face seemed to have lost half its wrinkles in an instant as he launched into an eloquent dissertation on his favourite theme.

"It seems like yesterday that I picked this square blue seal out of the countess mother's paper-basket. Ah, it was on the day when the gracious count shot that splendid fourteen-antler stag!" Or else, "How the rain poured down that November morning to be sure, when Pater Ludolf gave me the big red seal off the archbishop's letter,"—thus ran the current of his lively monologue. The seals were like a living diary to the old man's narrow, circumscribed mind, and in turning them over, the sunshine or snow, pleasures or sorrows of bygone years, rose up again before his eyes.

"Ah, and this big black one! It was after Count Kunibert's death that I got it. Heigh-ho! What disorder Count Kunibert would have made among my seals with his lively, meddlesome ways, for ever climbing on to the table. The Pfeilhofens were always hard to manage as boys!" And Bitterbalg shook his head with a strange mixture of expressions struggling for the mastery on his hard old face, divided perhaps between regret that Count Kunibert was not there to meddle with his seals and relief at the safety of his collection.

"But that would have been long ago, of course. He would have grown to understand and respect them now. Seventeen last Sunday! Hey! what a fine youth! What flashing eyes! He would be riding forth to go to court on his coal-black Arab charger, no doubt, and I would be holding his stirrup for him. Heigh-ho!"

Luitgard rose from her chair with something like impatience. There had been moments during the last few days when her heart had risen in unconscious rebellion against the dominion of her dead brother. Was not Kunibert dead? And was not she alive? It was to her and not to him that life and the chances of life had been given. But Luitgard

would sooner have died than betray this feeling of mortification to anyone, so she merely said, calmly enough—

"I have no time to look at the seals to-day, Bitterbalg. I must be going. It is late."

"Just as Countess Luitgard pleases," said the old man, with a shade of stiffness. "I should have thought it was interesting to a Pfeilhofen to look at my collection. Count Kunibert would never have missed this opportunity."

"But I cannot stay. Delius is waiting for me in the park."

"And who is Delius?" asked Bitterbalg superciliously, thinking that this must be some new name for one of the beasts or birds which he knew were her only playthings.

"It is my friend," said Luitgard. She had not mentioned her first meeting to anybody. To whom should she have done so? Neither her father nor Bitterbalg ever inquired as to how she spent her time in the park. She had not told him when as a child she had found that large clump of mistletoe growing on one of the oak trees, nor when she discovered the skylark's nest on a clearing in the park. Why should she have told anyone of this last and greatest discovery? The idea of so doing had not even occurred to her.

If Bitterbalg had taken her words more seriously, and questioned her on the subject, Luitgard would certainly have told him all she knew about Delius, being as yet unaware of any reason for concealment; but when she said, "It is my friend," the old servant merely shrugged his shoulders, and as she left the room dismissed the matter from his mind, with a muttered "One of her silly fancies. That is what comes of being born a woman." He was still far too much ruffled at the slight put upon his seals to let his mind dwell upon any other subject.

"I shall take them to Gottschalk," he decided; for Gottschalk was always his last resource when he could get absolutely no one else to listen to the history of his seals. Then he would close his Sunday afternoon by tucking his portfolio under his arm, and trudging off through the park, and out of the gate leading into the forest, where stood the huntsman's lodge, for Gottschalk, endowed with a long-

suffering nature, was capable of listening for hours to Bitterbalg's long-winded sealiology. Now and then, when such a phrase occurred as, "The day when the fourteen-antler stag was killed," or "It was that same winter when so many roedeer were frozen to death," Gottschalk's massive, phlegmatic countenance would even show a spark of intelligence, or he would chime in with some further detail regarding the event in question.

Long before Bitterbalg had finished stowing away his sheets into the portfolio, Luitgard had reached the Herons' Tower, and had found that, despite her delay, she was first at the trysting place. How empty it looked without that figure, which already had become so familiar to her thoughts in one short week. It was strange how completely metamorphosed the place now appeared to be,—henceforth she could never think of it apart from Delius. She stared to-day at the spot she had known since childhood, and she could hardly remember what it had all looked like before she had seen Delius lying there among the flowers. It seemed to her as though the grass had only grown to be his couch, that the water was merely there to reflect his image, that those trees, planted a century ago, had only grown up to cast their shade for him; in fact, that all Nature's work of a hundred years had been but preparation for that wonderful moment.

When at last Delius stood beside her, half breathless with the recent exertion of having scaled the wall, more beautiful yet for the transient wave of colour on his olive cheek, Luitgard started again almost with her first feelings of surprise. Although she had thought of nothing else all the week, she had not remembered him so bright and so brilliant, so graceful, so lithe, and so resplendent.

He held out his hand and said, "Good-day, Luita," and she replied, "Good-day, Delius." And then they sat down together on the steps, and talked in much the same fashion as they had done on the previous Sunday; or rather he talked, and Luitgard sometimes said "Yes," and sometimes "No," and occasionally "Oh yes," or "Oh no." Last Sunday this

manner had seemed to puzzle and almost to provoke him, but to-day it was different. He had got the clue to it, and was content to take her as she was. He himself spoke rather less this time; there were longer pauses in the conversation as he sat leaning against one of the moss-grown statues, while his eyes seldom left her face. It seemed almost as though he were loth to break the silence.

This last week had brought out the violets in full perfection, and once, during a long pause, Luitgard stretched out her hand to gather a particularly fine one.

"Why have you moved?" said Delius reproachfully.

She looked at him surprised. "To gather a violet."

"Why have you spoken? I was thinking before that you looked like the spirit of silence, and now the idea is spoilt." His tone sounded almost fretful.

Luitgard stared, but said nothing more. There were a great many things about her new friend which she did not at all understand. Once or twice again to-day he had betrayed that same emotion and rapture which he had first shown about the nightingale. She felt he must have very strong tastes and likings, but she had changed her mind several times about what these probably were. Once she had thought that it was music, once it had seemed to be flowers, and then again it had been sunshine or perfume.

"Well, since the spell is broken," said Delius, smiling again in the next instant as though nothing had ruffled him, "I shall help you to gather violets. Could you not make a wreath of them and put it on your head?"

"I once made a violet wreath," said Luitgard, flushing, "but I shall never make one again—and what good would it be?"

"Great good to me. It would be a picture to look at, and life would be worth nothing without pictures. But hush!"—he broke off abruptly. "What is that? Is there not someone coming yonder?"

Far off from one of the crosspaths traversing the park there were footsteps audible among the dead leaves. Delius and

Luitgard both turned their heads and listened; he with something like anxiety on his face, she with nothing but wonder that anyone should be passing here.

"It is only Bitterbalg," she said at last, as a black figure became visible on a path which ran almost parallel with the avenue. "He is probably going to visit Gottschalk."

"Who is Bitterbalg?" asked Delius quickly.

"Our old servant. Shall I call him? He might fetch a string to bind the violets together."

"For God's sake be quiet! Don't speak, don't move till he has passed. Now, sit back in the shadow, or it will be too late!"

He spoke so vehemently that Luitgard instinctively obeyed.

Delius watched the retreating figure until Bitterbalg was quite out of sight, then, drawing a breath of relief, he turned back to Luitgard.

"We are safe now—for to-day," he said, "but the future must be provided for." The last words were more to himself than to her, and Luitgard would not have understood them even had she heard.

Delius was now silent. For some minutes he appeared lost in deep reflection; once or twice he looked about him with a dissatisfied air till at last he said—

"Does that old man often pass this way?"

"Not very often."

"Does anyone else pass here?"

"My father sometimes on his way to the forest to hunt."

"What is the rest of the park like? Are there many trees?"

"Yes, but not as many as here."

"Not as many as here. Then it must be lighter—more open."

He got up from the steps and walked a few paces about, as though in search of something. Suddenly he stood still beside the tower and struck the wall with his hand.

"What is in here?" he asked. "Is it empty?"

"No, it is full of books, I believe; but I have never been inside. It is always kept locked."

"Always locked! Why?"

"I don't know. My father once said that the evil genius of the Pfeilhofens lives in those walls."

"Ah!" Delius seemed to find the statement interesting. He put some further questions to Luitgard, and appeared to be satisfied with her rather scanty answers.

"And it is never opened, you say?" he repeated. "Yes, that might do."

He began walking round the tower, scrutinising its every detail very closely with his eyes, and Luitgard followed him, not yet understanding what was in his mind.

There were four windows on the ground floor of the tower, placed two and two at the sides where the doors were not, but the windows were closely protected by iron bars, and, though Delius tried each one in succession, there was no loophole or assailable point to be discovered in any of them; he could not even obtain a glimpse of the interior, for there were wooden shutters closed from within. Neither did the winding staircase that led to the platform on the roof offer better results, for this steep flight of steps, enclosed within a little turret built on to one of the angles of the Herons' Tower, was nearly dark, its narrow slit windows having no communication with the main building. Finally, Delius examined the two doors; they were large and massive, and, like the windows, showed no signs of yielding.

"And you really have never been inside the tower?" he repeated.

"Never."

"We must devise some means of getting in."

"But do you want to get in?"

"Yes, I want it very much, and I mean to get in. I always get what I want."

"But are you not afraid?"

"Of the evil genius? No!" And he laughed. "Would you be afraid to go in, Luita?"

"Not if you were there with me."

She said it merely as though stating a fact, and yet Delius shot a glance of covert gratitude towards her. He stooped to examine the lock.

"The lock does not look very difficult to manage," he said. "I am clever enough with my fingers, and if I only had a piece of iron or a pointed stone, I almost think I could knock it open."

He cast his eyes upon the ground, but there was nothing of the kind to be seen here, nothing but soft violets and primroses and tender blades of grass. Then he took the stone statues into consideration one after the other, as though contemplating the possibility of pressing a finger or toe into the lock-picking service. Suddenly, he plunged his arm down into the stone vase nearest to him.

"Faugh! Only dead leaves and dirty water!" he exclaimed with disgust, withdrawing his hand stained with a brown-coloured slush, which he proceeded carefully to remove with his handkerchief. "No use in looking in the other one. Take care, or you will get your hand muddy as well. I hate to see a woman's hand soiled."

But Luitgard had already removed the stone covercle, which lifted off the vase much as a teapot's lid is raised. It came off with some slight difficulty, bringing large flakes of moss along with it.

"It is not wet here," said Luitgard, withdrawing her hand as white as it had gone in. "See, here is some moss inside. Feel how dry it is." And she held out a tuft of dry yellowish moss towards him.

The lid of the second vase, being neither chipped nor cracked, had been enabled to keep out the moisture which had filtered into the first one.

"And here is more moss," continued Luitgard, throwing out a whole handful as dry as the previous one. "And oh! what is this? Something hard. It is iron!"

"A key!" exclaimed Delius. "As I live, it is the key of the tower!"

And verily it was a curious and very heavy old key which now passed from her hand into his ; probably a duplicate key to the tower door, placed here long ago by someone—by Bitterbalg, perhaps, or by Othmar himself when the place was finally locked up after the agitating events of Kunibert's premature birth and early death. Whoever had placed it here must have forgotten all about it, and here it had lain these seventeen years undisturbed, and must inevitably have rusted away long since but for the protecting stone lid. Even as it was, a certain amount of rust had already gathered on its surface, and when he placed it in the lock it was stiff and helpless, and could not be induced to turn.

"That shall not baffle me," said Delius, clenching his teeth together ; and he sat down on the steps and set to work, scraping and rubbing the key with as fierce an energy as though he would have rubbed it away to dust. Though his hands looked delicate as a woman's, there was strength and ability about them such as would not have been suspected from his first appearance as he indolently reclined in the flowery grass toying with violets and daisies.

"Give me one of your gloves," he now said to Luitgard, who had watched him with an ever-growing feeling of surprise. "I can polish the iron with it better than with my handkerchief."

Silently she handed the glove.

"Yes, that is better," he said, looking up at her for a moment with a quick flashing smile. "Only a few minutes longer, and we shall be able to enter the tower."

"But why do you want to go in ?"

"Because there we should be safe."

"Safe ! Is there any danger ?"

He glanced at her sideways, uncertain whether to put faith or not in this almost abnormal innocence.

"Tell me," he said quickly. "You have not spoken of me to anyone ?"

She reflected for a moment.

"I think I said something to Bitterbalg this afternoon."

"Great heavens ! And what did he say ?"

"He said nothing—I think he was not listening."

For a few more minutes there was silence while Delius bent over the key with redoubled assiduity. At last he rose to his feet.

"Listen, Luita," he said, "I have something to say to you. If ever you mention me to anyone I shall never come again. There is a danger, a great danger, to me, but you cannot understand it. You can do as you please, of course, but remember if you speak you lose me for your friend. Now make your choice—which shall it be?"

There was a sudden decision, almost a sternness, in his tone which took Luitgard aback. His face was not only as white, but almost as hard as marble; the lines about his mouth were almost threatening, and his eye was glowing with an expression both sinister and masterful. Suddenly Luitgard discovered that she could be a little afraid of her new friend. But she did not hesitate for a moment; the mere thought of not seeing him again seemed to her a hideous impossibility; and besides, she knew of no reason why she should mention him to anyone, so she merely said—

"If you wish, I shall tell no one."

The hard lines on his face relaxed on the instant, and he drew a long breath of relief. It was an experiment that he had tried, and although he had been tolerably confident as to its issue, yet it was a relief to know that the first victory was gained, and gained so easily. His influence over her was already even greater than he had guessed.

He had now quite finished polishing the key, and with it in his hand he again turned to the door, where, kneeling down on the upper step, he worked for a few more minutes in silence. His lips were very tightly pressed together, and the veins stood out on his forehead like strong whipcord as he worked the key backwards and forwards. The ill-used lock gave forth piteous groans and squeaks under his hands, like a soul in mortal pain,—perhaps the genius of the place loudly protesting against this violation of its privacy,—but at last it yielded, and the heavy oaken door flew open, disclosing another door within.

This second door was of glass, and showed no handle on the outside ; but Delius passed his arm without difficulty through a broken pane, and opened it after a final louder creak of resistance.

Luitgard's courage now began to fail her. She had never been actually forbidden to enter the tower, and no words had ever passed on the subject of that bridge which had silently been removed on the morrow of her seventh birthday ; but she would never have been sufficiently adventurous to engender this bold project, to which she had only passively acquiesced, subdued and drawn along by her companion's irresistible energy. And when Delius now said, "It is open," she turned very pale, and felt her heart sink within her.

"Are you afraid?" he said, laughing softly. "The evil genius shall not touch you. What! you are trembling! Give me your hand; we shall go in together."

And so, hand in hand, like a couple of children stealing into forbidden ground, these two young creatures entered the dark and gloomy Herons' Tower.

CHAPTER V

LEONORA'S SONG

THEY had scarcely crossed the threshold when Luitgard felt Delius shudder violently, and with his disengaged right hand he covered his eyes for a moment.

"Oh, it is hideous here! So dark, so black, so gloomy!" he exclaimed.

Coming from without, the room where they stood appeared to be pitch dark; there was a disagreeable musty smell, as of long-gathered mildew, and nothing could be clearly distinguished.

"We must have light," he exclaimed, groping his way to a window and tearing open the shutters to the side which he deemed most secure from observation.

Even now the room was scarcely light, and it was but a ghostly sort of clearness after all, for the close iron gratings were in league with the gloomy pine trees to keep the sunbeams at arm's length. It was only by degrees, as their eyes grew used to the dim uncertain twilight, that they were able to distinguish details. It was a large, oblong room, whose walls presented unbroken lines of dusky folio volumes ranged in massive oaken bookcases, save at one corner, where a flight of rotting wooden steps led to the rooms above. Low settees and couches, stools and arm-chairs covered with faded moth-eaten tapestry, were grouped irregularly about the room, along with half a dozen tables. These tables were of various sizes and shapes, and the articles ranged upon them exceedingly multifarious and heterogeneous in character, not unlike the nondescript collection of objects sometimes to be seen in a modern antiquarian's shop. There were telescopes and

bird cages, inkstands and scent bottles, tall china vases filled with faded flowers crisp and brittle to the touch ; ivory-mounted fans composed of green and scarlet tropical feathers, which fell to pieces as soon as they were handled ; delicate little caskets cunningly carved out of ebony or sandalwood ; silk pouches and reticules, containing perchance some threads of faded embroidery wool, or a scrap of feminine handiwork, begun erewhile by fingers now long since turned to dust. And everywhere the moths had been at work, riddling curtains and hangings with their delicate openwork embroidery, while the spiders vainly sought to repair the damage by darning up the holes as promptly with transparent gossamer threads. And everywhere, too, books and boards, tables and curtains were densely sprinkled with green-grey mildew, intersected with numerous minute silver lines, that perchance might have been the slimy tracks of some crawling creature.

Altogether, though the room contained ample evidence of being the abode of many living animals, such as snails and lizards, moths and spiders, rats and mice, and possibly even weasels and polecats, there was no evil genius visible anywhere—leastways not at first sight.

Suddenly Delius gave a cry of pleasure as he sprang forwards towards a table where a richly embroidered scarf was hanging, brilliant despite the dust and cobwebs which covered it.

"It is Grecian !" he exclaimed, with delight. "They make them like that in my country." But as quickly he dropped it again, for his mere touch had raised a whole slumbering generation of moths, which fluttered around him in a dense cloud, surprised at this unwonted disturbance.

"And there are other Grecian and Oriental things here," he said presently, looking round and pointing to a gorgeous screen composed entirely of the plumage of tropical birds which stood behind one of the long low couches. "Someone must have lived here who loved these Eastern things."

"Yes, that was the Turkish lady Zelmira, who was the first wife of my great-grandfather."

"And somebody also who loved books."

"Eberhard, my great-great-grandfather. He was very learned, and only cared for reading or looking at the stars. He lived almost entirely in the tower, and it was also here that he died."

Delius looked at the books, and made a grimace.

"I do not care for books except with pictures in them," he said, taking down two or three volumes in succession from a shelf and opening them rapidly, to be laid aside in the next instant with an air of disappointment when he found that they contained no illustrations. Then he walked round the room and lifted the lid of a heavy carved oaken chest which stood in a window embrasure. A cloud of dust flew into his face.

"Whew! I am nearly choked. The dust of centuries seems to be lying here, but I can see gold letters on the backs of some of the volumes. Perhaps the picture-books are hidden away down there; we shall look for them next time. It is too late for to-day. Let us go outside again, and breathe a little fresh air before I go."

The maturing of his plan and the polishing of the key had occupied a great portion of the afternoon; the sun was beginning to sink very low, and soon Delius would have to go away. They locked the door of the tower, and hid the key inside the old stone vase where they had found it, then together they crossed the fallen pine stem which served them as bridge. It bent a little under their united weight, but Luitgard was not afraid, for Delius was holding her hand. They continued to walk along through the park, apparently without object, for Delius appeared to be led on solely by the flowers which grew ahead of him; now it was a bunch of budding hawthorn which he lingered to gather, now a clump of blue hepaticas which he stooped to investigate, but he scarcely ever deviated from his course or slackened his pace perceptibly.

"Are we not going too far?" asked Luitgard at last. "Are you not afraid of the danger you spoke of?"

"I shall see it before it reaches me," said Delius. "I must still go a few steps farther on. Ah! that is what I wanted."

He stood still, drawing himself back into the shade of a chestnut tree, but gazing with all his rapt attention at Castle Pfeilhofen as seen in the distance, across the open glade between two parallel avenues of horse-chestnut trees.

Pfeilhofen was one of those gigantic edifices belonging to the German architecture of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a large quadrangular building, showing a dozen windows in depth on every side, and flanked at its four corners by massive square turrets slightly higher than the roof of the main building. With no particular intrinsic beauty of its own, save that conferred by centuries of existence, the whole building, fashioned out of dull grey stone partially draped in luxuriant ivy hangings, bore that impress of calm and arrogant self-assertion which seems to say, "Mere architectural ornaments and tricks of masonry may be well enough for newer upstart abodes. Pfeilhofen requires none of these. Our beauty lies in our immutability. Such as we were five hundred years ago, such we are to-day and shall be five hundred years hence. The world outside may change, but Pfeilhofen remains the same."

"Let us go back now," said Luitgard anxiously, still imbued with a vague idea of possible danger for her friend.

Delius seemed to waken out of a dream.

"Yes," he said, "I am going. It is late—later than I thought."

He made a movement as though to retrace his steps, then, stopping again suddenly, he asked abruptly—

"How old are you, Luita?"

"Seventeen," she replied. "My brother Kuni and I were born on the same day."

"And you have no more brothers or sisters?"

"None at all. That is why it is so dreadful that Kuni died instead of me. He was the last Pfeilhofen. Is it not a pity?"

"No," said Delius emphatically, "it is not a pity. I am very glad that it was the boy who died, and not the girl."

"But if Kuni had lived, then he would have been your friend instead of me."

"Kuni would never have been my friend," returned Delius almost fiercely. "It is only you that I want for my friend."

This was quite a new view of the case to Luitgard, who never before had heard anyone say that it was lucky she had lived instead of Kunibert.

"Remember next week," were Delius' parting words. "The same day and at the same hour if the sun shines, but do not expect me in dark weather."

This time he did not ask it with a beseeching glance, but unconsciously he had assumed a tone of authority.

Would the sun shine? was the question which haunted Luitgard all that week. But, alas! it poured. Yet, nevertheless, she stole down to the tower at the appointed time, and stood there for over an hour under dripping trees waiting; for she would not have dared to enter the tower alone. But Delius did not come.

Another long week passed by, and this time the sun was merciful enough to shine on Sunday.

In approaching the tower, Luitgard saw that the door had been opened already, for the key was sticking in the lock. She pushed the glass door softly open, and caught sight of Delius kneeling beside the carved open chest, so deeply absorbed in the contemplation of a book he held open that he was not aware of her entrance till she stood beside him.

Luitgard at once perceived that a change had come over the room since last time. The cobweb wreaths had been removed, and the dust no longer lay as thick upon books and tables; even some of the window panes had been rubbed and scoured until their dimness was almost gone.

"Yes, I have been putting the room to rights a bit," he said, in answer to her glance of surprise. "We could not have sat here comfortably with all those cobwebs and dust around us. But I hate doing work of this sort unless I am

obliged, and so I have left the other windows for you. Do you hear, Luita? It will now be your task to keep the room in order and to prepare it for me every week before I come."

"Yes, Delius," said Luitgard submissively.

"And you will gather flowers to fill these vases every week. And mind they are always fresh and bright, for I cannot bear to see a withered flower."

The tone of authority was now even more pronounced than it had been before; for by this time he had gauged the full extent of his power over Luitgard, and was resolved to use it unsparingly.

"I have also been upstairs to look at the other rooms, as I thought that we might perhaps be safer up there," continued Delius, pointing to the ceiling. "But they are wholly unfurnished, and the staircase is broken and ruined at places; so we shall be obliged to remain down here. I have already examined everything, and have decided how the furniture is to be arranged. See, and I have found some picture-books," he added, holding out a large volume of Greek history whose open page showed a fine engraving of the Acropolis of Messenia.

"They are cold, these pictures, for they have no colour, no warmth, but yet they remind me of my home."

"Are those the pictures of your home?" asked Luitgard.

"They pretend to be the pictures of it; they call themselves so, poor pale little ink-and-paper shapes; but I have to close my eyes before I can see my home as it really is: the bright blue sky, the glittering sea, the groves of waving citron and oleander trees traversed by jewelled insects and golden darting fireflies."

He had knelt down again beside the carved oaken chest, resting the heavy volume against its edge. Luitgard also knelt down by his side and looked at the pictures as he turned over the pages one by one, explaining and describing the places they represented with that same breathless eagerness which characterised him whenever touched by any passing emotion. And Luitgard looked and listened open-

eyed and wondering at the marvels she heard of that strange bright country, that seemed the natural and fitting abode for a fairy prince.

Delius drew a long, tremulous sigh as at last he closed the book.

"I wonder whether there are any more like this," he said, as he began lifting out some of the books below, opening each one in turn, but closing each again in disappointment. The books here seemed to be in worse condition than those in the rest of the room; there were clasps broken off, torn covers, and tattered pages. Apparently the chest had been used as repository for dilapidated volumes, all waiting for the sewing up, or pasting together, which they were never fated to get.

"Quite a hospital!" laughed Delius. "Nothing but maimed or crippled books, and oh, what a dust!" And he looked ruefully at his soiled fingers. "But I mean to investigate everything down to the bottom of the chest. See this poor fellow in the last stage of consumption. Time has used him ill, even stripped his coat off his back," and he pulled out a book which had lost its cover and which, tattered and limp, presented a woebegone appearance.

It was an old volume of botany entitled *Crescentius Pflanzenkunde*, bearing the date 1494 and with a curiously illuminated title-page.

"Ah, that is the second volume of the old botany which stands on a shelf in the castle," said Luitgard, looking over his shoulder. "I often wondered where the other part could be."

"There are no pictures worth looking at," said Delius, "nothing but wretched little woodcuts," and he was about to close the book when he caught sight of a folded-up parchment sheet lying between the pages. There were music notes written upon it, and it was that which had caught his eye.

"There is a song written here," he said, as he took up the sheet and opened it out. "You must sing it to me."

"I cannot sing," returned Luitgard.

"Cannot sing! Well, perhaps all the better. I love a

silent bird better than a jarring one. A false note is agony to me. Then it is I that must be the singing bird, I suppose."

The ink was much faded, the music lines irregular and hard to decipher, the words written in a delicate but feeble female handwriting. There was no heading or title to the page, but the song began at once with the words—

"Oh, have you seen my own true love?
Oh, have you seen him ride
Upon a charger milky white,
His falchion by his side?"

"But it is Leonora's song!" exclaimed Luitgard in wonder.
"Can it be really true?"

Delius followed her to the window, and together they deciphered the contents of the sheet, she reading the words and he the notes, and by degrees her voice joined his as he sang—

"Oh, have you seen my own true love?
Oh, have you seen him ride
Upon a charger milky white,
His falchion by his side?"

To seek the Saviour's holy tomb,
Bound by a sacred vow,
He rode away, and I was left
To wear the willow bough.

But now a year has come and gone,
A second one has fled;
Alone I stand upon the tower,
And mourn for him as dead.

Ah, where art thou, my Willibald?
Why dost thou tarry yet?
While here I watch from early dawn
Until the sun has set!

Kind Death, be thou my comforter!
The Herons' Tower is high!
Forsaken by her dearest love,
A maid can only die!"

"It is sad," said Delius, when Luitgard had told him who Leonora was, "but it is beautiful. Is there any more music at the other side? No, only writing."

The second side of the parchment was covered with close writing, very much faded and indistinct, but in a different handwriting. Delius tried to decipher it, but it proved to be in Latin, and he could not make out the sense of it.

"Bah! I shall not spoil my eyes over it. The music was all I cared for, and that is enough. It shall be our song, Luita. Let us sing it together once more."

At this moment, as they stood bending over the music, the parchment sheet, grown brittle from having lain so long folded together, now cracked asunder down the middle, one half of it remaining in her hand, the other in his.

"That is an omen," said Delius. "Let us hold by it. Luita, shall we not each keep one piece as a token, or rather a pledge?"

"A pledge of what?" asked Luitgard.

He looked at her for a moment as though he meant to say something. His lips had even moved already, but he checked himself with an effort. "Too soon, too soon," he muttered. "Why alarm her? It would be a pity—and besides, it is too soon."

"A pledge of friendship," he said aloud.

CHAPTER VI

EBERHARD'S CURSE

IN the whole vast Castle of Pfeilhofen there existed but one small space in which Othmar von Pfeilhofen could feel perfectly happy, could forget his disappointments, and stifle the uneasy upbraidings of his conscience. In his wife's presence he was too painfully conscious of her mental superiority, among his family pictures he was apt to read reproach in the painted eyes of his ancestors,—reproach for having no son and letting their name die out,—but once in his music-room, seated before his beloved spinnet, he seemed to lapse into a peaceful sort of dreamland, wherein there were no troubles, no disappointments, and more especially neither stags nor wild boars. For, to his shame must it be said, that, contrary to all the traditions of the Pfeilhofens, the noble passion of hunting possessed no attractions for this degenerate scion of the house. His dreamy, indolent nature made him averse to the fatigues and exertion which such pursuits involve, his indecision of character prevented him from ever obtaining proficiency in the sport, for his eye was neither quick, nor his hand steady enough; while his innate aversion to witnessing bloodshed or suffering of any kind made his successes even more painful than his failures. Yet not for worlds would he have confessed as much to any mortal soul; and likewise not for worlds would his servants have acknowledged to him or to each other their knowledge that their master, the last of the Pfeilhofens, found no pleasure in what had been the pride of the family for untold-of generations. There never yet had been a Pfeilhofen who did not hunt, nor should there

be now ; so by a kind of tacit agreement the little fiction was kept alive that Othmar was as passionate a sportsman as any of his forefathers.

By dint, moreover, of invariably posting him in the most favourable positions, and so to say guiding his hand at every stroke, Gottschalk contrived to retrieve the family honour so far as to enable Othmar to have collected a very fair array of trophies in the course of years. Numerous stags had been gently lured to run almost into his very arms ; full many a struggling wild boar had been held down for him to despatch with a knife as easily and safely as though he had been slaughtering the common domestic animal ; and as though to leave no doubt at all as to the fact that the master of Castle Pfeilhofen was indeed a great and doughty hunter, each and all of his various achievements in the hunting field were duly registered in Gottschalk's uncouth and unformed handwriting in an ancient Bible which he kept in the hunting lodge.

This Bible had been the family Bible of Gottschalk's parents and grandparents, and, as was then the habit, they had used the blank pages at the beginning as a register for the births, marriages, and deaths of the Gottschalk family. The present Gottschalk was, however, a bachelor, never having yet found a woman whose eyes were to him as attractive as those of an expiring roedeer, nor one whose pearly teeth ever parted in a smile half as fascinating as the snarl of a captured wolf. No female voice could be as sweet to his ear as the death-bellow of a wounded boar, nor rose-and-lily complexion worth comparing to the red, glossy hide of a twelve-antler stag.

Having, therefore, no children of his own whose names could be entered in the old Bible, Gottschalk did not see why he should not use its remaining blank pages as a register for the heads of game killed by the Herr Graf ; and just as Bitterbalg had his collection of seals to amuse him on Sunday afternoons, so Gottschalk had his Bible to con over and count up how many stags or foxes had been killed within the last month.

The person who took least interest in this conscientious register was Othmar himself. He killed the animals merely as a painful duty which he recognised, being glad each time when it was accomplished, and not caring to hear further about it when terminated. He rejoiced when he had killed a stag or spiked a boar, not for any personal satisfaction thereby obtained, but rather on the principle of a child who gabbles off an irksome lesson in order to return to play. When he had finished his lesson he was always eager to return to his play—that is, his music.

One evening, about the beginning of May, Othmar was sitting as usual in his music-room—a long, low apartment whose windows overlooked the terrace. He had only just returned from a distant point in the forest, where Gottschalk had forced him to shoot a capercailzie, a lengthy and wearisome undertaking, involving the sacrifice of a night's sleep and of a day's music, much creeping about on hands and feet through dripping brushwood, and a long, fatiguing ride home. The capercailzie had, however, been successfully bagged, and Othmar was thankfully reflecting that he would now have peace for some time. The season for capercailzies was at an end, and during the summer months, he as well as the forest animals, could hope to enjoy a brief season of respite.

He had not yet begun to play, but was sitting idly before his instrument, listening dreamily to the evening song of a blackbird which came floating in through the open window. Presently the song grew more clearly defined and less like the vague warblings of a bird; there was a distinct melody in it now, and a melody which seemed half familiar to his ear. He passed his hand over his forehead—

“Am I dreaming? Or is not that bird out there singing Leonora's song? Bah! I am over-tired with the long morning walk. The idea is absurd.”

But the song still continued, and grew more audible every moment. There was no possibility of doubt; it was a female voice that was singing, and it was singing Leonora's song—that song which he had so often vainly tried to puzzle out. He rose

and went to the window, and there saw, to his surprise, Luitgard walking on the terrace. There was no one else within sight, so it could only have been her voice he had heard ; and yet he had not known that Luitgard had a voice. Her back was turned to the window, and he listened for a few minutes longer in silence.

Yes, there was no doubt about the matter ; it was most distinctly Leonora's song that she was singing, and the modulation that had perplexed him for so many years was now clear as daylight to his mind. Where had she learned this hidden melody ? From the birds in the park, or the babblings of the stream ? Had Luitgard taken to composing ? he asked himself in bewilderment as he watched her, and did she compose better than he himself could do ?

Luitgard wore a pale grey gown which fell about her in soft, silvery folds like twilight wrappings ; it made her appear taller and more womanly than Othmar had yet seen her look before. Her hair hung down her back in two heavy, lustreless plaits. Her father now stared at her almost as though she had been a stranger.

"Luitgard ! You singing !" he called out, when she had come to the end of the second verse.

She started almost guiltily.

"Luitgard, do you know what you have been singing ? It is Leonora's song. How did you guess it ?"

"I—I found it," said Luitgard, coming up close to the window.

"You found it—where ?"

"On a piece of parchment," said Luitgard irresolutely.

"Where is that parchment ? I must have it at once."

Luitgard had already made a gesture towards her bosom, where the token of her friendship with Delius lay securely folded up, when some latent instinct of secrecy caused her to pause in the act.

"I shall fetch it," she murmured confusedly, turning away from the window.

"Here it is," she said a few minutes later, as she entered the

room where her father was sitting, and half reluctantly yielded up the sheet of yellow parchment into his eager fingers.

"How strange!" exclaimed Othmar, sinking down again on to his chair and becoming at once absorbed in the contents.

"Yes," he said, looking up a few minutes later, "it is Leonora's song, but there is only one half of it here, and yet you sang the whole just now. How did you guess the end of the words?"

Luitgard looked embarrassed.

"I heard it—I remembered it," she said hurriedly, too truthful by nature to think of a falsehood. "The rest is written on the other half of the sheet."

"Where is the half? Why did you not bring it as well?"

She now looked seriously distressed.

"I cannot find it this evening, father, it is too dark; but to-morrow I can get it for you—indeed I can," she added deprecatingly, afraid of having angered him.

"Very well, child," said Othmar good-naturedly. "Never mind looking for it this evening if you are tired. To-morrow will do quite as well." He looked at her more attentively and stroked her hair, struck by some unusual expression on her face, which for the moment made him forget Leonora and her song. There was a sort of suppressed glow about her whole person such as he had never noticed before. Had the music wrought this wondrous change?

But he had no clue to the riddle. How should he guess that she was no longer the same person as before? She had ceased to be Luitgard, and had become Luita.

"What a sweet voice you have, Luitgard, and what a pity it is that I never had time to teach you music thoroughly!" he said, with an impulse of tardy regret. This was one of those rare moments when he caught a fleeting glimpse of all his daughter might have been to him. "But you see my life is such a busy one," he rambled on, in feeble, weak-minded excuse. "My sonatas always took so much time to compose, and then Gottschalk for ever coming with his forest reports. On

hunting days I had no peace for anything at all, sometimes could hardly sit down to the spinnet for an hour."

He looked at her almost wistfully, as though he expected some response ; but Luitgard remained silent. If he had looked for some expression of gratitude or affection he was disappointed, though he should have known his child better by this time.

After all, there was something to be said on his side as well as on hers ; the entire fault of this peaceful yet unnatural estrangement did not lie on his side alone. It is possible that if Luitgard had had the caressing ways and coaxing tones of other children, she might long since have forced her way into his heart and into his life. If she had loudly clamoured for her father's love, she might have obtained it ; it is even possible that, had she been other than she was, if she had possessed the courage to shake off the panic inspired by her mother's presence, she might, by sheer persistency, have conquered that mother's heart.

But Luitgard was not one of those happy normal children whose wants or troubles find vent in storm and tears. That one attempt of hers on her ninth birthday had been her first and last, and, whenever she recalled it, it seemed indeed to her that she must have been mad in very truth to have expected anything of her mother. Luitgard had scarcely left babyhood when already she understood that she was not wanted and not liked. She grew cold in proportion to the coldness she felt around her, and hard in proportion to the hardness she encountered. She made no advances, and would probably now have rather recoiled before any symptom of affection from either of her parents. She had accustomed herself to do without love for so long that there was no longer any desire for it left in her heart.

"You are growing very fair, my little daughter," he went on after a pause, watching the candlelight as it played along her hanging plaits.

Luitgard, still silent, gave a faint smile, and Othmar put out his hand and gently touched her hair.

At this moment there was the sound of some distant door being shut, and Othmar, starting, withdrew his hand as though with a guilty conscience. He knew quite well that Hedwig could not come here, but the influence of the woman was so strong, or the weakness of the man so great, that her presence was always felt.

Luitgard noticed the movement; her lips tightened directly, and presently she silently left the room.

It proved less easy than Luitgard had expected to get back the second piece of parchment from Delius; he had a marked dislike to relinquishing anything in his possession, or to forego any advantage he already held.

"Why does your father require it?" he asked suspiciously of Luitgard.

"He wants the song. He is fond of music."

"But why did you ever show him the first piece?" persisted Delius. "He need not have known about it at all."

"Is that also a secret?" inquired Luitgard innocently. "I did not know. You only told me not to speak about you."

Her manner said plainly enough that she was ready to obey any further order he was pleased to give, and so Delius understood it. But he spoke impatiently.

"And now I tell you that on no account whatsoever must you mention that you have been inside the tower. Nothing of what you do or find here must be spoken of outside. If once we are traced here, then all is finished, and I shall come no more. Are you quite sure that you understand me, Luita?"

Luitgard, though but half understanding, promised all that was required of her; and then Delius took his piece of parchment out of his pocket.

"I do not like parting with it, it seems like a bad omen; for this was to have been the pledge of our—our friendship. However, there is no help for it. To keep it back now would only arouse your father's suspicions. But, Luita, you must give me some other pledge in exchange."

Luitgard raised her limpid eyes to his.

"Give you what?"

"Give me," and he drew a step nearer to her, while a curious light came into his eyes, "give me a—a lock of your hair."

There was a change of tone at the end of this sentence, almost as though he had ended it differently from what had been previously intended.

"I have brought you the rest of the song, father. Will you not play it?" said Luitgard to Othmar that same evening.

"The song? What song?" For he had meanwhile forgotten all about it. "Oh, Leonora's song, to be sure! How could I forget? Let us see—let us see."

And Othmar spent a happy half-hour in practising over the air on his spinnet, while Luitgard sat listening at his elbow.

"We must paste it together again," said Othmar, turning it round. "Ah, there is writing on the other side."

"It is Latin," said Luitgard.

"Some old prayers or psalms, most likely. I used to know Latin myself pretty well at the time I was preparing for the cloister. Let me see if I have quite forgotten it."

He got up and went to the window, so as to throw more light on the faded ink characters, and in a moment became absorbed in the writing. Presently he half turned round with a smothered exclamation.

"Did you speak, father?" asked Luitgard.

There was no answer save a certain growing excitement about Othmar's manner. Alternately he bent lower over the parchment sheet, and then again he held it up at various angles to the light, trying to decipher the words.

"Where did you find this?" he asked, looking up suddenly.

Luitgard was so much startled by the question that she quite forgot Delius' injunction as to silence, and said what was the literal truth—

"I found it inside a book."

"What book?"

"It is called *Crescentius Pflanzenkunde*."

"Oh, that old book that's lying on the shelf in the dining-

hall. Strange, though, that no one should have found this parchment before!"

Luitgard gave no answer, and Othmar again absorbed himself in his reading. There was no reason why she should tell her father that the parchment had been found not in the first but in the second volume of the work; nor that that volume had lain not upon a shelf in the dining-hall, but in a carved oak chest inside the Herons' Tower.

When Othmar was alone again his first impulse was to go to Hedwig. He had always since boyhood been used to turn to her in any doubt or perplexity; but it was now past nine o'clock, and Hedwig would already have retired for the night. He durst not disturb her, far less excite her, at this hour for fear of bringing on one of those terrible headaches which caused her such excruciating pain. So compelled, perforce, to lock up the discovery within his own breast, Othmar spent the greater part of the night pacing the music-room in boundless agitation, or else sitting at the table with the parchment spread out before him, coming every moment to a fresh conclusion on the subject, and abandoning it finally only to throw himself on his bed, and there toss restlessly to and fro till morning. When at last he fell asleep, his dreams resolved themselves into delirious visions of bygone events which had long been absent from his mind.

In his dreams he again saw the quarrel of the two brothers, Wilibald his grandfather and Konrad his grand-uncle; their duel in the tower; Wilibald's wound; and Konrad's flight, leaving a lifeless figure lying in the lowest room of the Herons' Tower, whose boards were stained with the mark of blood shed by a brother's hands.

Those were figures that were now dead and turned to dust, passions long since extinguished; and yet, if this tattered parchment was to be credited, the consequences of those passions were not yet at an end. The shadow of those vanished figures might even yet be thrown across the path of living persons.

Othmar could scarcely await the morning. Three times he went to his wife's door, and three times he was told that she could not see him yet.

At last he obtained admittance, and old Walpurga, as she closed the door behind him, was struck by the pallor of his face and the unusual excitement of his manner. And as one hour passed, and then a second, Bitterbalg was at a loss to understand why the spinnet was not heard this morning as usual; and Gottschalk, having waited over an hour with his report from the forest, sent up a respectful message, and received as answer that the Herr Graf had no time to speak to him to-day.

"No time to hear about the chase! A Pfeilhofen no time for the chase!" repeated Gottschalk incredulously. "There must be something wrong in the house!"

"Whatever there may be right or wrong in the house," retorted Bitterbalg, who had delivered the message, "you may be quite sure that your business lies in the forest, and not inside the castle."

He himself was quite as much surprised as was Gottschalk at this unusual departure from established habits, but he could permit no open criticism of the count's doings. There were moments when Bitterbalg could not resist the temptation of administering a covert snub to the forester, who had only been thirty-two years in the place, and was therefore to be considered as a comparative new-comer.

Meanwhile, the husband and wife were still alone.

"Can it be true?" repeated Othmar, restlessly pacing the floor.

The countess sat in her usual seat by the window, whose curtains were slightly drawn back to throw more light on the sheet of parchment which lay spread out on her lap. There was a strange likeness, and yet stranger contrast, visible between Hedwig and Othmar when thus seen together. It was the same cast of feature in both, the same fair skin, the self-same coldly blue eye and short upper lip. At first sight one might almost have believed all the energy to be

on his side, all the impassibility on hers. His constant and restless activity, her immovable calm, would have been apt to deceive a superficial observer.

Not yet forty but with hair already snow-white, with features sharpened by sickness, Countess Pfeilhofen still held her figure as erect and her head as proudly as she had done twenty years ago, not willing even yet to confess herself conquered by fate. At this moment she was leaning back in her chair, still pondering over the contents of the parchment that lay on her knees.

This parchment was no other than the will of Eberhard von Pfeilhofen, which had never been found, and indeed never searched for, since no such necessity had arisen; and after wading through Latin paragraphs of prodigious length, after looking up every doubtful word in the dictionary till it was doubtful no longer, it now became apparent that this will was intended to disinherit his eldest son Wilibald in favour of Konrad for the contingency of the former failing to fulfil his engagement to marry his Cousin Leonora.

This disposition had been repeated over and over again with many technical terms and learned phrases, of which it will suffice here to reproduce the concluding paragraph.

"Therefore be it clearly understood that this my Castle of Pfeilhofen, which I have inherited from my ancestors along with the broad lands which appertain to it, shall only be inherited by my son Wilibald, now absent on a pilgrimage to the Saviour's tomb, if he keeps his plighted troth to his bride and cousin, Leonora von Pfeilhofen, as befits a knight and a gentleman. Should he fail in this, or be the cause of grief or distress to the said Leonora von Pfeilhofen, whom I have loved as my own daughter, and who has tended me in sickness as the most loving child could have done, then do I direct and dispose that the Castle of Pfeilhofen and all the property bearing my name should pass into the hands of my youngest son, Konrad von Pfeilhofen, and through him in due order of succession to his children and grandchildren. But

the children and grandchildren of Wilibald shall only inherit the property if they be likewise the children and grandchildren of Leonora von Pfeilhofen.

"This, the foregoing, is my last will and testament, and may my heaviest curse, the curse of a dying man, rest upon whosoever of my descendants should endeavour to overthrow the dispositions here contained."

This document was dated November 9th, 1657, and signed "Eberhard von Pfeilhofen." Written entirely in his own handwriting (easily to be identified by comparison with other family papers and letters), it was incontestably a genuine production. It was not witnessed, but by the law of the country such a holograph will was undoubtedly valid.

"But how came it there inside that book? And how came the song to be written on the other side?" he asked, looking at his wife as though she were an oracle who had power to answer all questions and solve all riddles.

The countess took up the parchment again rather wearily; compared to his excitement, she had received the news almost with indifference.

"My eyes are not different from yours, Othmar," she said. "I can read the secrets of the past no more than you. I can only form conjectures, which may be either true or false. How came the parchment inside that book which you say is lying on a shelf in the dining-hall?" (for Othmar, believing such to be the case, had so described the matter to his wife). "Why, the book must originally have been in the tower library, I suppose, and someone must have brought it here twenty years ago or more to read or consult, and then forgot to carry it back. The book has heavy brass clasps, I remember, so nothing that was inside could have a chance of falling out. And how came the parchment to have been deposited in the tower? Why, that is easy enough to understand, since it was there that Eberhard died. No doubt he made his will directly after Wilibald had betrothed himself to Leonora and had gone off to Palestine."

"But the song?" persisted Othmar. "How comes the song to be written here?"

"Oh, that," replied Hedwig carelessly, and almost contemptuously, "that is surely the simplest part of the matter to understand. I wonder you do not see it. You know as well as I do that Leonora is believed to have been a little out of her mind in consequence of her bridegroom's prolonged absence; that she used to spend all her days on the tower, watching for his return and singing doleful songs. It was at that time that her portrait was taken, and there are many old scraps of poetry to be found in her handwriting in albums and keepsakes. What more likely, therefore, than that she once found this parchment in the tower after Eberhard's death, and made use of it for noting down her inspirations. She would not have been very likely to know its value even if she were sane, not being able to read Latin."

"But that it should have lain for nearly eighty years undiscovered!"

"There is nothing in the least wonderful about that, that I can see," retorted the countess, who seemed determined to make of Othmar's discovery as commonplace an event as possible. "Who should have discovered it? Not the Turkish lady Zelmira, certainly, seeing that she scarcely could read. Your grandfather Wilibald never used the tower at all after Zelmira's death, neither did your father. There might have been a will inside each volume without it being discovered."

"Yes," said Othmar slowly, "that accounts for a period of about sixty years. But this particular volume must have been here in the house for seventeen or eighteen years at least. How was it that the will was never discovered before?"

"That is just a chance," said Hedwig. "Of course you might have discovered it any day during the last eighteen years, only you did not. What is the precise title of the book where it was?"

"*Crescentius Plant Lore*," replied Othmar.

"Well, and are you given to studying botany? Or is there

anyone else here who is? Who, therefore, should ever have found the will? Not Bitterbalg or old Walpurga surely?"

"True, true," said Othmar thoughtfully. "I suppose you are right, Hedwig; you always are. And yet I cannot help fancying that I had the book in my hands a few years ago. Strange that I should not have found it then!"

"Call it strange if you like," returned the wife with a slight shrug, as though to dismiss this subject upon which Othmar was dwelling with such wearisome persistency. "After all, it does not much matter what you call it, or where it was found. It is a curious and interesting discovery, nothing more, and not worth wasting further words about it."

"But what is to be done now? That is the question."

"To be done now? Nothing. This will can affect no one."

"It affects us so far that we are not really the legal possessors of Pfeilhofen; and then there is the curse, Hedwig—think of that! Have we not felt it already?"

The last words were said very low and hesitatingly, almost more to himself than to her.

"Nonsense, Othmar," said Hedwig, flushing slightly. "I hope this crumpled old piece of parchment is not going to turn your brain. Who is the legal possessor of Pfeilhofen if you are not?"

"But the will says expressly that only if Wilibald's descendants are likewise the descendants of Leonora are they to inherit the property."

"Eberhard could not foresee that Wilibald should hear a false report of Leonora's death, or that Leonora would go mad and jump off the tower, or he would have made another will."

"Perhaps," said Othmar. "But the will is here all the same, bequeathing the property to Konrad and his descendants."

"Konrad never had any descendants," decided Hedwig, in a peremptory manner. "Either he killed himself, or else he left the country and died young. Nothing more was ever heard of him."

Othmar took half a dozen more turns in the room, and then

stopped before his wife. He had grown very pale, and it was in a rather uncertain voice that he now said—

"But supposing Konrad did not die young? Supposing he had left children?"

Hedwig's thin hand grasped the arm of the chair whereon she was sitting, a momentary flash came into her eye.

"Then there would still be a Pfeilhofen!" she exclaimed, "a Pfeilhofen to carry on the family name and save it from extinction!" She sank back again. "Ah no! It was but a passing vision. It is impossible. We must have heard before had Konrad left heirs. My Kunibert alone could have saved the family, and my Kunibert has failed me!"

There was something like a sudden sob in her voice; her hand moved up and clutched the miniature brooch at her throat.

"Hedwig!" said Othmar pleadingly; for this subject was seldom mentioned between them. He shunned it even more than she did, and both picture and miniature were secret but acute sources of torture to him.

But Hedwig had already recovered her self-possession. The frosty clearness had returned to her eye and the firmness to her lip as she said—

"Let us waste no further words on the subject. This will be simply a dead piece of parchment which has failed in its object. Leave me now to rest; my head aches with all this unnecessary discussion."

Then, as Othmar was about to leave the room, she called him back to say—

"You have not spoken about your discovery to either Bitterbalg or Luitgard, I suppose?"

"No," returned Othmar. "To no one."

"That is well. There is no occasion ever to mention it," said Hedwig, sinking back against her cushions.

CHAPTER VII

THE GREY SEAL

BERHARD'S will was not again alluded to between husband and wife during the weeks that followed. As Hedwig had said, there was absolutely nothing more to discuss about the matter ; and even if Othmar's self-tormenting conscience did not wholly succeed in divesting itself of certain uneasy scruples, he shrank from again exposing himself to the sarcastic shafts of his wife's pitiless logic.

Luitgard, now that Delius had opened her eyes to the dangerous consequences of their secret being discovered, felt too much relieved at having escaped detection to make any further reference to the luckless document which had one moment threatened to betray them. Chance, which plays such a surprising part in sometimes bringing secrets to light, is surely just as wonderful for the curious way in which it will sometimes shield a secret already exposed to view by an adverse circumstance. The secret may be there, lying revealed to the full light of day, like a glittering coin thrown up to the surface by a turn of the ploughshare, and seeming to court detection by its ostentatious glitter. But the passer-by, who could not have failed to see it, has his eyes turned in another direction ; so the opportunity is lost, and ere it comes again shrouding grass and weeds have begun to sprout over the spot.

And so it was with Luitgard's secret, which by the merest accident had hitherto remained undetected. Until quite recently she had not even been aware that she possessed a secret ; and if she had not at first spoken of Delius or of her visits to

the tower, it was scarcely with any thought of concealment, but simply because it was not her habit to mention things to anyone. Thus, when first questioned by her father about Leonora's song, she would have been ready, no doubt, to give him all the details as to how and where she had found the piece of parchment, had he but pursued his questions on the spot. But the subject had been suffered to drop, and ere it was again revived Luitgard had learned her first lesson in concealment. Othmar's mistake had, moreover, stepped in, as though purposely in order to shield Luitgard; for nothing has such a blinding effect on the intellect as a preconceived notion of any sort.

Hedwig herself, whose sharper eyes might doubtless have detected something incongruous in the evidence had she chosen to cross-question her daughter, had her own reasons for not caring to revive the topic of Eberhard's will. Othmar had told her that Luitgard had found the parchment inside an old book which lay upon a certain high shelf in the dining-hall, so Hedwig had naturally concluded that such was the case. The mere notion of Luitgard having anything to conceal had never so much as entered her mind.

So June came and went again. The horse-chestnut alleys, having blossomed forth into one short week of pink and white splendour, had changed their ballroom finery for the everyday robes of sombre green; and now the lime trees were having their turn, sprinkled over with delicate nosegays of bridal white, and shedding around their sweet, penetrating scent, dreamy and suggestive as the languishing cadence of voluptuous music.

Nothing had occurred to change the quiet current of life at Castle Pfeilhofen. Hedwig still sat in her darkened chamber; the only difference which this lovely summer weather made to her was that the window behind the heavy green curtain was occasionally open instead of shut. Luitgard still occasionally stole across the park to meet Delius in the tower, and Othmar still sat before his spinnet in the music chamber, or at his desk transcribing sonatas of his own composition on to large folio sheets of paper.

He was thus sitting at his desk one morning towards the middle of July, and he held a pen in his hand; but it was a sheet of letter paper, not music to-day, which lay on the desk before him.

Othmar was not given to much letter-writing, nor was the occupation a congenial one to him; but with regard to certain points of family etiquette he was imbued with true German exactitude and punctiliousness, and there were two dates in the year which imperatively demanded the inditement of an epistle beginning, "My highly honoured lady mother," and signed, "Your obedient and profoundly attached son, Othmar von Pfeilhofen." The first of these dates was the beginning of the year, the second was the feast of Saint Anna, which came in July, and happened to be the patron saint of the old countess. The second of these annual letters was invariably accompanied by a respectful but formal invitation to spend part of the summer at Castle Pfeilhofen, which invitation had, however, been regularly declined during the last eight years, not from any ill-feeling on the part of the frivolous old lady, who had grown more and more to dread the monotony of country life, and was glad to make a pretext of impaired health in order to avoid the necessity of leaving the court atmosphere so dear to her soul. In the year following her last visit to Castle Pfeilhofen, Countess Lilienfeld had broken her leg when slipping on the polished ballroom floor during a minuet danced at court, and, though her recovery had been swift and complete, this accident furnished her with an excuse that was to last her through life. It proved to be a very useful leg indeed; for while it never hindered her from taking part in any dance or diversion, it invariably prevented her from doing anything in the least degree unpleasant to herself. She would, however, write from time to time to her son or her daughter-in-law flighty little notes, filled chiefly with minute descriptions of court festivities or the prevailing fashions; and Othmar, as he now sat pen in hand engaged in composing his annual letter for the feast of Saint Anna, tried to call to mind when exactly the latest of these flighty little notes had been received. It would not seem

respectful, he thought, not to make some kind of allusion to the note which he happened to have mislaid or lost.

"Bitterbalg," he said, as the old servant just then happened to enter the room, "can you remember when it was that I last heard from the countess mother?" He was accustomed to refer to Bitterbalg in such matters, knowing the old man's memory to be well-nigh unassailable.

"The last letter of the countess mother?" Oh yes, Bitterbalg remembered it quite well, for the Herr Graf had given him the seal off the sheet.

"And the date?"

Bitterbalg stood for a moment reflecting. He did not know the date by heart, but he could tell it by a reference to the seal in question.

This sounded mysterious to the count, who had never interested himself much in Bitterbalg's monomania; but when the old man presently returned, bearing under his arm a ponderous portfolio, he began to scan these proceedings with something like careless amusement.

Bitterbalg untied the ribbons of his portfolio with a sort of reluctant importance. He scarcely felt justified in admitting the commonplace light of a week-day to shine on his precious seals, which by right should be only illumined by Sabbath rays; but, on the other hand, the opportunity of displaying his treasured collection to the Herr Graf was far too precious to be allowed to pass.

"This, Herr Graf, is the Pfeilhofen sheet," remarked Bitterbalg impressively, as he removed several wrappings of tissue paper. "I do not usually uncover it during the week, but the Herr Graf is the head of the family, and if he desires"—and he began to undo the snowy wrappings.

"Oh, never mind," said Othmar indifferently, "let it be. We were only looking for my mother's seal, were we not?"

Bitterbalg cast a slightly aggrieved glance at his master.

"Just as the Herr Graf pleases," he said, so stiffly that Othmar hastened to add, "But since you have already undone the sheet, let us look at it by all means. Very pretty, very pretty

indeed, Bitterbalg. That is a very good impression of my seal that you have got there in the centre. And what is that little packet tied with yellow silk?" he added, with a faint attempt at showing further interest in the matter.

"That, Herr Graf, is my reserve packet—that is to say, the seals which I have twice or three times over, as well as some others which are not real seals at all, but just foolish impressions of flowers or beasts or birds, such as those which, craving your pardon, are used by the countess mother. The duplicate seals often come in handy to replace an impression which has got chipped or cracked; and if Count Kunibert had only lived, there would have been great need of them, I warrant! Scrambling upon the table and cracking my finest seals with his wooden sword!"

"But about my mother's letter?" reminded the count, who was growing impatient at these digressions.

"That is just what I am coming to, the countess mother's seal. It must be here in the reserve packet." And Bitterbalg, untying the yellow floss silk which bound it together, shook out the multicoloured contents of a large paper bag on to the writing-table.

There were seals of all imaginable sizes, shapes, and colours of wax, from the delicate rose hue suggestive of maiden blushes to the uncompromising black that betokens tombs and tears. Some of the seals had been neatly trimmed round at the edge with a pair of scissors, doubtless in preparation for taking their places on the pasteboard sheet; others, whose preferment to this proud position seemed yet more remote, had been left just as Bitterbalg had originally received them ten or twenty years ago, hastily torn off a letter by the donor; for these were the days when envelopes were yet unknown. Old rags of paper, mostly yellow with age, were attached to many of these neglected impressions, while faint odours of violet or patchouli hung about them. The dowager's seal was easily picked out from amongst this motley assemblage, having a sort of mildly dissipated appearance of its own not inappropriate to the character of the writer, and represented here by a scrap of trellised pink paper

adorned by the impression of a dove bearing a letter in its beak executed in palest blue wax.

Bitterbalg considered the pink and blue rag for a moment.

"Oh yes, the Herr Graf was sitting at his spinnet in the music-room when he gave me the seal. The letter had come that morning, and was lying on the table along with a packet of those reed pens which had just arrived from the town; and Gottschalk was waiting outside with the large stuffed boar's head that had been prepared for the Herr Graf's hunting room."

All this came back to Bitterbalg's mind as he looked at the pale blue seal.

"I remember Gottschalk interrupting me just as I had hit off the bass of my symphony," said Othmar, in a peevish tone. "I never succeeded in hitting it off as well again. Once lose the thread, and you lose it for ever!"

"But the Herr Graf will doubtless remember when the boar's head was stuffed," said Bitterbalg, "and that will help him to remember the letter."

"I remember that the pens came after Easter," replied Othmar evasively, "because in Holy Week, when I wanted to copy out that Miserere to play in the chapel, there was not a decent reed pen to write with, and I ordered a packet at once. So the letter must have come about the middle of April. Yes, that will do, thank you, Bitterbalg," he added, as an intimation that he wished to be left alone. "There, take away your seals; I must finish my letter now," and he pushed the multi-coloured heap towards the old servant.

Bitterbalg gathered up his seals in silence and left the room, much hurt at the slighting manner in which his valuable collection had been dismissed. "Serves me right for showing it on a week-day," he muttered between his teeth, as he walked along the passage that led to his room.

Meanwhile, Othmar proceeded to fill up the first page of his letter to his highly honoured mother, and, having done so, went on to dry it on the blotting-book, and as he did so became aware of some hard obstacle which lay between the sheets of

blotting-paper. He put in his hand and drew out a large grey seal, one of Bitterbalg's reserve seals evidently, which, having slipped in here, had been overlooked.

"I must give it back to Bitterbalg later," said Othmar, smiling to himself, "or he will never forgive me for having been the cause of losing such a treasure!" He continued to write, hardly even glancing at the seal, which he laid down in front of him on the sloping desk. For about half a page further all went smooth, and Othmar's pen glided glibly over the page; but when he had come to the end of the necessary felicitations, when he had assured the old lady, in every possible combination of phrase, that he as well as his wife and daughter fervently hoped and desired that the yearly recurring feast of Saint Anna might find their honoured parent in unimpaired health and strength; when he had expressed the stereotyped wish that the Castle of Pfeilhofen might this year enjoy the privilege of affording her shelter, then Count Pfeilhofen's powers of stylistic composition apparently came to an end, and he sat considering what next to say. These letters were always very uphill work for Othmar, he and his mother having little in common, and an eight-year separation having made them all but strangers to each other. She would not have cared to hear about his symphonies and sonatas, as little as he interested himself in her frills and furbelows. What was he to say more? And by what means could he manage to extend the letter till over the first corner of the third page, so as to present a decent appearance? Othmar gnawed his pen, gazing mechanically at the large grey seal that lay just in front of him, as though seeking to read there an answer to his question. He merely stared at the seal because it happened to be there, but his gaze, from being vacant at first, grew more attentive as he presently became aware that it was an impression of his own coat of arms—the three arrows of the Pfeilhofen family surmounted by a crown. Hardly much interested even then, he took up the seal in his fingers, and then he saw that some words of writing were visible on the scrap of paper attached to it. The ink was brown and faded,

and Othmar had to hold the paper up to the light before he deciphered the following words:—

“per il riposo dell’ alma della sfortunata Leonora e di suo fidanzato il nobile Con—”

The rest was torn off, but the name of Leonora alone was sufficient to set off Othmar’s imagination on the wildest tracks of conjecture. What Leonora was here meant? It could be no other than that hapless Leonora von Pfeilhofen who had perished so tragically seventy-nine years previously. What signified this paper? And how came it to be written in Italian?

Othmar turned the paper round and scrutinised the seal again, perceiving now for the first time that this reproduction of the Pfeilhofen coat of arms differed from the usual seal; the arrows were correctly drawn as well on the scroll beneath them, but the crown by which it was surmounted was not a German count’s crown, to which his family was entitled. It was not a German crown at all, but of some foreign shape—French or Italian it seemed to him. Without quite knowing why he did so, Count Pfeilhofen rose to his feet, and, still holding the seal, called for Bitterbalg.

“How did you come by this seal? Who gave it to you? Can you recollect?”

Bitterbalg looked at the seal held out by the count, but found it advisable to put on his spectacles in order to gain time before replying; for he never liked to betray hesitation when thus questioned.

“If the Herr Graf will only give me the seal into my hand, that I may look at it nearer, no doubt it will all come back to me.”

It was with a frown of intense thought that Bitterbalg stood staring down at the seal which lay in his outstretched palm like a large grey moth. Gradually his countenance cleared and a smile began to dawn on his face, as the circumstances connected with this particular spot of sealing-wax came slowly back to his mind.

“It was in the sacristy after mass,” he said, with a far-off

light in his eyes, as though seeing a vision. "The sun was shining in by the windows, and there were bunches of white lilac on the altar. I remember it quite well, for I had gathered them myself that morning. He was in a great hurry as he took out his pocket-book."

"Who was in a hurry?" interrupted Othmar.

"Pater Ludolf. He took out his pocket-book and said, 'I have something for you, Bitterbalg. Here, catch it quick, man, for in an hour I must be at Castle Sturmfeder to baptize the infant there.'"

"Are you quite sure he gave you that seal?"

"Yes, yes, it was just so. It was Pater Ludolf who gave it to me sure enough, and there were bunches of white lilac on the altar that day."

"The infant at Castle Sturmfeder can only have been Otto Sturmfeder, the youngest son of the family. No infant has been born there since, and he is nearly thirty. Why, that seal must be about thirty years old!"

"But yet not the oldest in my collection. I have many others which"— But Othmar interrupted impatiently—

"Why did you never show me this seal before? Did it not strike you as strange that Pater Ludolf should get letters sealed with my arms?"

"I did not think about it in that way, Herr Graf; in fact, I always felt suspicious about that seal not being a real Pfeilhofen seal at all. There is a screw loose about the crown, I say, and that is why I never pasted it into my collection. And then the wax too, such a queer outlandish grey colour. I never understood that wax myself."

"There is a great deal more than the wax that I do not understand here," said Othmar testily. "If this seal has been rightfully used, then somewhere in the world must live, or have lived, a man who had the right to it, someone who knew or had known Leonora von Pfeilhofen. We know of no such man. Where can he be?" And Othmar drummed nervously on the table with his fingers.

After a short silence he turned to Bitterbalg.

"Are you quite positive about when you got the seal?"

"Yes, Herr Graf. The sun was shining, and there were lilacs on the"—

"Bitterbalg, you are a fool," said the count shortly. "I mean, are you quite sure it was Pater Ludolf who gave it to you?"

He was quite sure.

"Well, then, keep yourself in readiness. I may find it necessary to send for Pater Ludolf to-day. Leave the seal here; I shall require it."

Bitterbalg, as he left the room, cast a woebegone glance at the large grey seal lying on the writing-desk, such a glance as an anxious mother may throw on a cherished infant reposing in a stranger's arms.

The letter to the dowager countess was not finished that day.

CHAPTER VIII

EVERARDO FRECCIACORTE

BITTERBALG held himself in readiness, but no message came. Othmar was in a half-dozen minds in as many hours as to what he should do. To go to Hedwig had naturally been his first impulse, checked, however, at recollection of the contemptuous coldness wherewith she had received the discovery of Eberhard's will. In the unsettled state of his nerves to-day he sensitively shrank from exposing himself anew to the sarcastic shafts of her pitiless logic without some more distinct basis to go upon than this ragged scrap of paper attached to an old seal. Before evening he had come to the conclusion that the discovery was of no importance whatsoever; and by morning he had so successfully worried himself into the opposite view, that he found it necessary to order the carriage to be harnessed at daybreak to fetch the village priest. But the carriage had not yet left the park when it was recalled by order of the count, who had finally decided to drive in himself and put the question to Pater Ludolf without further loss of time.

Pater Ludolf, being aroused out of his sweet morning slumber by the news that Count Pfeilhofen outside was waiting to speak to him, naturally concluded that the countess was dying at last, and as he hastily put on his clothes began to prepare some consoling words to be addressed to the presumptive widower—exhortation to fortitude in this crisis, and resignation to the will of the Almighty. His sacerdotal imagination had even got the length of rapidly passing the black church vestments in review, doubtful as to whether they

would be fitting for such a grand occasion as a requiem mass for the Countess Pfeilhofen.

He found the count in the small parlour, pacing it restlessly up and down.

"Pater Ludolf," began Othmar, far too impatient to attempt any preliminary address, "I have come to ask you for some information regarding a seal which Bitterbalg says he received from you."

"Which Bitterbalg says he received from me," repeated the priest, a little bewildered at this abrupt address. He was a mild old man, past seventy, with brown, dovelike eyes, now rather heavy with slumber. His carefully prepared consolatory phrases were still buzzing in his perplexed mind.

"I am anxious to know whether you can give me any nearer information on the subject."

"The ways of Providence are inscrutable," replied the priest, still scarcely more than half awake; "but all is for our good."

The count looked at the priest, as if he suspected him of being not quite sober, but realising that he was only sleepy, he went to the small latticed window, and, opening it, let in the fresh morning air, which seemed to revive the old priest's faculties.

"You desire to know something about a seal I gave to Bitterbalg?" he said, when he had grasped the situation. "I have given him many seals, I think."

"But this one dates from very far back. If Bitterbalg is right—and his memory is usually to be trusted—he must have got it nearly thirty years ago."

As he spoke, Othmar pushed the scrap of paper towards the priest, pointing to the big grey seal.

Pater Ludolf sighed deeply as he took up the seal. Possibly he was reflecting that, since the question of this seal had slumbered for thirty years before becoming a burning one, it might just as well have gone on slumbering two hours more, and have permitted a poor old village priest to enjoy his usual allowance of well-earned sleep. But well, well, the Count

Pfeilhofen was the patron of his church and the greatest man far and wide, though he chose to live the life of a recluse, and a village priest could not afford to demur at his patron's caprices.

"Do you know anything about it?" repeated Othmar.
"Do you recognise the arms upon the seal?"

"The arms of Pfeilhofen—the three arrows," said Pater Ludolf. "Of course I know them." He was contemplating the seal with a rather blank expression. "Is it about this one that you want information?"

"It is about the letter that was closed with this seal that I require information. It was a letter written in Italian, as the words at the back of the paper will show you. Have you any recollection of it?"

"In Italian! Oh, the Italian letter!" exclaimed the priest, with a look of far-off remembrance dawning in his dovelike eyes. "But that was long ago—very long ago!"

"Then you do remember it?"

"Yes, yes, I remember it now. There was money in that letter—Italian gold."

"Where is that letter? Where is the gold?" cried Othmar, excitedly rising to his feet. "Quick, tell me!"

The village priest looked scared.

"The gold? But it was changed long ago into German money."

"And the letter? You must have the letter still!"

Pater Ludolf shook his head.

"It must have been destroyed long ago. I am not in the habit of keeping letters."

Othmar positively stamped with fretful disappointment.

"But its purport, at least. You must remember that?"

"The letter contained but a few words, which being written in Italian I managed to decipher from its resemblance to Latin. They stated that the money enclosed was to be used for masses for the souls of Leonora von Pfeilhofen and of her bridegroom, Wilibald von Pfeilhofen, both deceased in 1659. That was the curious part of the letter, since your grandfather,

Count Willibald, only died in 1688, twenty-nine years later than his Cousin Leonora."

"Inexplicable," said Othmar, who had listened intently. "And the signature? By whom was the letter signed? Was it Pfeilhofen?"

"Certainly not Pfeilhofen," replied the priest readily. "It was quite a different-sounding name—a regular Italian name, which, however, has slipped from my memory."

"And was there no address given? No clue by which you might have acknowledged the receipt of the money?"

"None," said the priest.

"And why?" said Othmar, bringing down his fist on the table in angry agitation, "why, in the name of all the angels and devils, did you never mention this matter before? Why did you not tell me of it at the time?"

The old priest opened his dovelike eyes very wide in bewildered deprecation.

"How could I have mentioned it to you, Herr Graf? That was twenty-eight years ago, and you were then a boy of twelve, and the gracious countess was just ten years old. Your father, the noble Count Walter, had died shortly before, and the countess mother was never over fond of hearing of such things as death and mortuary masses"—

"True," said Othmar, somewhat ashamed of his heat. Then, after a minute, he resumed.

"But you yourself—surely you must have felt some curiosity on the subject? Did you never speculate as to who had sent that money, and how that letter came to be sealed with my coat of arms? How did you account for it to yourself? What was your theory?"

"As for being puzzled—yes. But as to forming a theory—no. We priests are not much given to speculation, but are content to receive just as much confidence as our fellow-creatures choose to give us. So I changed the money and said the masses, and in time the occurrence faded from my mind. I don't think I have recollected it once these last twenty years."

"But you must recollect it now!" said Othmar, springing up again in irrepressible excitement. "I tell you that I have a great and urgent interest in the matter. Search your memory. Can you recall no details? What was the postmark upon the letter?"

"It was from Italy—that is all I know."

"Italy—Italy," said Othmar, grinding his teeth. "Italy is wide, and that is no clue. The name—the name is what we need!"

Pater Ludolf's timid eyes watched the count in some alarm as he agitatedly paced the little room, but it was in vain that he racked his memory in search of the name which his patron desired.

"Here we are before a stone wall," said Othmar to himself as he turned to go. "The truth lies behind it, that is sure; but I do not know how it is ever to be pulled down now. What folly of you to have burned that letter!"

It was with frowning brow that Count Pfeilhofen stepped into his carriage to return to the castle, scarcely even acknowledging the profound salutation with which Pater Ludolf escorted him to the door.

Of course there was no more peace for Othmar that day; the meagre scrap of information he had received about the grey seal only tended to make the mystery deeper and more inscrutable. What possible motive could a perfectly unknown Italian have had in ordering masses to be said for the defunct Leonora and Wilibald? And how came the said stranger to seal his letter with the Pfeilhofen coat of arms? Some former family retainer might no doubt have abstracted a seal, but then how came it to be surmounted with a foreign crown? Think as he would, no theory that was in the least degree plausible or probable would suggest itself to his mind.

It was already growing dark when the sound of wheels was heard on the gravel, and presently Bitterbalg entered the room where Othmar, plunged in thought, was sitting.

"His Reverence Pater Ludolf is outside, and would speak to the Herr Graf," were the words which caused Othmar to start up in renewed excitement.

"You have found the letter? You have brought it?" he eagerly exclaimed as the old priest entered the room.

"No, not the letter, but something else which may be of use," said Pater Ludolf, producing a large black leather-bound volume from under his arm. He laid it down on the table, and proceeded to open it slowly at the place where a page had been turned down.

"What is that book?" asked the count.

"That is the church register, in which I have entered every sum, however small, received for masses since I have been parish priest at Pfeilhofen. I did not think of it this morning—I was too"—("sleepy," he had been going to say, but substituted "too much surprised"). "But when the Herr Graf had driven away I remembered this register, and after searching for an hour or two I came upon this entry. There it is—let me see," continued Pater Ludolf, and slowly running a yellow, wax-like finger down the page, read as follows—

"September 22, 1710—two silver florins from Katharina Filgans for masses for the soul of Thomas Filgans, her deceased husband. September 25—one florin for the sick grandchild of Mathias Hepberger. September 26—five pieces of Italian gold changed for the value of twenty-four silver thalers to be employed in masses for the souls of Leonora and Wilibald von Pfeilhofen, from Everardo Frecciacorte."

"Frecciacorte!" repeated Othmar, in growing surprise. "The name is entirely strange to me; I have never heard it before. It is evidently an Italian name. The mystery is blacker than ever, but it is time to ask Hedwig what she thinks of it!"

Three or four times already that day Othmar had been at his wife's door intending to apprise her of his discovery, but had always restrained himself; now he was able to do so no longer.

Hedwig, at first apathetic, and more than usually exhausted by pain, listened with evident incredulity to her husband's hurried and entangled exposition of the case. It was only when the seal and the church register were laid before her that she seemed to be roused at last. Her eye lit up, her

spare figure straightened itself, almost vehemently she snatched at the book and bent her head over it in silence, scrutinising the words of the paragraph over and over again, yet apparently reaching no conclusion.

The count meanwhile had thrown himself into a chair and was murmuring with fretful impatience—

"What does it all mean? How is the mystery to be explained? What can be the motive of a stranger—a foreigner, a man with a name quite unknown to us—for taking an interest in Leonora and Wilibald von Pfeilhofen? And, above all, how comes he to use our coat of arms?"

Hedwig's delicate eyebrows were drawn together in a frown of intense thought, her whole being strained with the effort of trying to remember something.

"Freccia—corte," she said at last pensively, slowly dividing the syllables from each other. "There is something half familiar about the sound. If only I understood Italian. The name must have some distinct signification. Freccia—corte. Corte," she repeated again more emphatically, "why, that is probably the same as *court* or *hof*; and Freccia"—

The perplexed frown had now suddenly given way to a strange expression of dawning comprehension as she looked up to ask, with seeming irrelevance—

"Do you remember that old red music-book?—those songs I used to sing as a girl? It was given to me by Wolfram von Winkelried," and even in the midst of her preoccupation Hedwig heaved a short, half-impatient sigh. "Surely it cannot be lost?"

"The red-bound song-book?" repeated Othmar, bewildered. "Yes, it is in the music chamber. But what has that to do with all this?"

"Bring it. Bring it at once," said Hedwig, with feverish impatience; and Othmar, still wondering, obeyed.

"I have found it!" she exclaimed some minutes later, with a ring of unmistakable triumph in her voice. "Read this," and she pointed to the following verse inscribed in the Italian song-book.

Othmar took it and read, spelling out the Italian words like a schoolboy repeating a lesson—

“Crudel’ freccia dell’ amore
Ha ferito questo cor,
Qui nel mondo null’ rimedio
Puo guarir il mio dolor!”

“Well?” he asked, having come to the end of his task.

“And now read the German translation of the lines printed underneath.”

Again Othmar mechanically obeyed—

“Mein armes Herz getroffen hat
Der scharfe Liebes Pfeil,
Kein’ Arz’nei ist auf dieser Welt
Die es kann machen heil!”

“Well?” interrogated Hedwig in her turn, as he again came to the end of the lines. “And does this still tell you nothing?”

He merely shook his head, still uncomprehending, but some reflection of her excitement had imparted itself to him as he now exclaimed hoarsely—

“For God’s sake, Hedwig, do not torture me with riddles, but if you have discovered anything, tell me so for pity’s sake! You do not know what I have been suffering these past weeks.”

Her cold blue eye shot a glance of scarcely veiled contempt at him as she replied—

“Oh, you men, with your wise heads and your blind eyes, not to read so simple a riddle even when its answer stands printed before you! ‘Crudel’ *freccia* dell’ amore’ is an almost literal translation of ‘Der scharfe Liebes *Pfeil*,’” she went on, italicising the two words upon which her attention had been concentrated. “And *corte* means *court* or *hof*. And your own name? Surely at least you have not forgotten that?”

“Pfeilhofen and Frecciacorte!” exclaimed Othmar, leaping

to his feet with a bound. "Great heavens! Hedwig, is that what you mean?"

"Yes, that is precisely what I mean. The name is simply a translation of ours. The letter to Pater Ludolf was signed Everardo Frecciacorte, and our great-grandfather was called Eberhard Pfeilhofen. Now draw your own conclusions!"

CHAPTER IX

A ROYAL BETROTHAL

THE conclusion was easy to draw. Twenty-eight years ago a Pfeilhofen had still lived in Italy, possibly a son of Konrad's, possibly even Konrad himself, who for reasons not hard of conjecture had deemed it advisable to alter his name in the aforesaid manner. It was even more than probable that some Pfeilhofens, disguised under the name of Frecciacorte, were yet living to-day somewhere in Italy. Ay, but Italy was a wide word, and how was the whereabouts of these problematical descendants of Konrad to be discovered?

And simultaneously with this question another one presented itself to the minds of both husband and wife. What would be to them the signification of any such discovery? What its immediate and unavoidable results?

What else but the necessary accomplishment of Eberhard's will, if they desired to act as honest people? But would not the sacrifice thus entailed be almost beyond their strength? Might not even the glory of discovering that a Pfeilhofen still lived to carry on the family name and save it from extinction be too dearly bought? After all, were they necessarily obliged to go out of their way to seek for someone, or something, that was so evidently anxious to remain concealed?

No open acknowledgment of the existence of these conflicting emotions and arguments passed between Othmar and Hedwig during the weeks that followed this second discovery; but the subject was ever uppermost in both their minds, to be brooded over by each in silence and solitude. The countess

shut herself up more than ever in her room, and Othmar tried in vain to drown his uneasy thoughts in music. He could not have told himself whether he most hoped or feared to follow up the clue so curiously thrown into his hands.

"Twenty-eight years ago!" he would repeat to himself at times. "They may all be dead long since—most probably they are dead, or we must have heard of them ere now."

And then he would draw out that yellow piece of parchment, and reflect how easy it would be to tear it up, not into two but into a hundred and a thousand pieces, without any mortal knowing that the document had ever existed.

But with a shudder he would then remember the curse so forcibly expressed in Eberhard's will, and would hasten to lock it away carefully, in horrified disgust at his own half-formed iniquitous thought. At such moments a sudden revulsion of feeling would make him resolve to start for Italy at once, and spare neither time, trouble, nor expense in discovering someone bearing the name of Frecciacorte. But though many such Italian journeys were undertaken in spirit, in reality Othmar's foot never got farther than the top of the turret staircase leading to Hedwig's chamber, to be invariably there arrested by the unaccountable reluctance he felt to formulating his intention in plain words.

Thus he pondered and hesitated, in self-torturing doubts and cogitations, until there came a day when the missing link was unexpectedly supplied by Fate with that direct, almost ironical simplicity wherewith she sometimes chooses to answer riddles over which poor blind humanity has been fuming and fussing itself to death.

It had been in July that Othmar had written that letter to his mother, which indirectly had led to the discovery of the Frecciacorte seal, and the end of August was nearly reached before that amiable but frivolous old lady found time to reply to her son's epistle.

"Such an uproar as we have had at court, to be sure! The like of it was never seen before at Buxenburg," she wrote in

feeble, delicate, pointed characters upon palest violet-scented notepaper. "You know, perhaps, that the dear grand-duke, surrendering at last to the entreaties of his devoted subjects, that he should take to himself a wife and give the throne an heir, had been conducting negotiations with the Duke of Pardena for the hand of his daughter, Princess Isabella. Everything having been satisfactorily arranged between the two princes, and portraits interchanged, it was settled that the Princess Isabella was to arrive at Buxenburg in the first week of August, accompanied by two gentlemen and two ladies from Pardena. A whole series of court festivities had been planned for the occasion, beginning with a grand illumination of the town and a torchlight procession on the evening of the princess's arrival. For a month before no one had talked about anything else but frocks and feathers, and I have suffered a perfect martyrdom at the hands of my dressmaker, till I feared that my spine was permanently injured by the hours of trying on I had to undergo. Not that I would have regretted that, in a worthy cause, and I can assure you that my *cendre-de-rose* gown embroidered with pearls was a perfect triumph of art, making me look younger (so I was confidently assured) than many a woman of thirty; but it is maddening and melancholy to think of all that splendour being wasted, for of course the fashion will have changed before the opportunity to wear these robes comes round again.

"Well, as I was saying, there was no hitch at all in the first number of the programme. The Princess Isabella arrived punctually as to date, and appeared at the large court reception given on that same evening. I wore a blue satin sprigged with silver, and made in the *bergère* fashion; but had I been able to read the stars in advance, I should certainly have done wiser in putting on the *cendre-de-rose*. However, I acted according to my lights, and there is no use in lamenting over spilt milk. And the blue satin was very handsome in its way, though not to be compared to the other. The Princess Isabella, who is very dark, wore an orange brocade shot with gold with a necklace and coronet of rubies. Her figure, though

spare and a little stiff, is tall and majestic, and as she lights up well she really looked almost handsome, and was enthusiastically applauded by the people when she showed herself on the balcony. The whole town was illuminated, and twenty-four cannons were fired off in her honour. Even the grand-duke seemed quite pleased and resigned to his fate, for he gave order that a hundred casks of wine were to be served out to the people for drinking the health of his bride and himself.

"But next morning, when he saw Princess Isabella by daylight, the grand-duke made a long face, which, as we all knew, boded no good. Her complexion looked as yellow as one of those lemons which I hear grow in her native country, and certainly the green velvet gown she wore had not been judiciously selected. But to call her a fright and a scarecrow was surely an exaggeration, and of course those Southern women can never hope to rival our German roses and lilies. The grand-duke, however, absolutely declined to listen to reason. It was in vain that all his counsellors represented to him the grave consequences of the scandal which must ensue should he attempt to back out of his engagement at the eleventh hour. Nothing availed, for he shut himself in his bed-chamber, refusing to see the princess again or to hear a word more of marriage. He had been cheated, he declared, by a false portrait. He was not going to buy a pig in a poke or to marry a broomstick. The Duke of Pardená must just take back his daughter, and there was an end of the matter.

"And there was an end of the matter, for you know that no power on earth can induce the grand-duke to change when once he has taken a notion into his head; so all the court festivities to which we had been looking forward were abruptly cut short. The Duke of Pardená was of course highly offended at this insult to his family, but, being in want of a scapegoat of some kind upon whom to revenge himself, his ire fell most heavily upon the Marquis Frecciamonte or Frecciacorte, whichever he is called—and it really does not matter which, for nobody ever remembers these long Italian names—the first of the two cavaliers who had been appointed to escort

the princess to her new home. Choosing to consider him responsible for the failure of the scheme, he forbade him to return to Pardená, degrading him from his former court office and despatching another envoy express to replace him in escorting back Princess Isabella to her native land. The Italian party accordingly departed last week, all but the Marquis Frecciacane. As in duty bound, seeing that Frecciacorte had lost his post through no fault of his own, but the grand-duke's refusal to wed the Princess of Pardená, our gracious master was pleased to offer the outcast a permanent home at his court ; and there being no other available situation vacant at present, he expressly created for his benefit the new dignity of Inspector-General of all the windmills in the country.

“ ‘But I understand nothing about windmills, your Serenity,’ had objected Frecciacane, when the proposition was made to him.

“ ‘Neither do I, nor does anyone else,’ retorted the grand-duke. ‘But that is no reason why you should not inspect them all the same officially and on paper. A title has never any earthly connection with the real duties attached to it ; in fact, there is nothing so misleading as a title, and you might as reasonably expect a secret councillor to give good advice, or the Lord High Steward of the Kitchen to make an omelet, as question your perfect appropriateness for the present nomination.’

“ ‘But’—

“ ‘There are no “buts” in my duchy,’ said the duke. ‘So that is a settled matter, and a monstrous good bargain it is for me indeed, seeing that I have secured a man who cannot possibly do any harm to my windmills, since he knows nothing about them, and have escaped marrying a woman at whose very recollection my brain begins to whirl like the sails of one of your new subjects driven by a high wind.’

“So here we are saddled indefinitely with a man stranded like a fish on dry land because he lacked the wit to know how to swim and keep afloat in the troubled waters of court and

diplomatic life. But what we are to do with him here at Buxenburg, mercy alone knows! as he is neither amusing nor a good judge of dress. I never was so disappointed in my life, as I had always understood Italians to be gay and cheerful individuals, for ever playing the guitar and dancing tarantellas, while this fellow has an expression of face that would not misbecome a mute at a state funeral. Besides, I shall always owe him a grudge for having so mismanaged things as to spoil my chance of wearing my *cendre-de-rose*."

"And now, Hedwig, now what is to be done?" asked Othmar, as he folded up his mother's letter after a final careful perusal of its contents.

"Now, of course, you will go to Buxenburg at once, and cautiously measure the situation and find out all that there is to be discovered. The time for action has come, but you see how lucky it is that you did not follow your first rash impulse and start off for Italy on a wild-goose chase."

Othmar had never told Hedwig of these delirious projects, but she knew many things that had not been put into words.

CHAPTER X

HEDWIG'S PLAN

THE rainy season had set in sooner than usual that year, and it was on a dark and stormy September evening that the count was expected home again after his visit to the capital. He had been absent for nearly a fortnight.

The countess sat alone in her room listening for the sound of the horses' hoofs on the gravel. Her usually colourless cheek showed a hectic flush this evening, her pale blue eyes glittered with unwonted brilliancy—in her whole attitude and mien there was something to betray that this woman of ice had once been a woman of fire.

Outside, the wind was tearing through the trees, causing the loose ironwork at the windows to rattle, whistling a different note through every chink, stirring the heavy hanging curtains, and making the candle flames flare up in spasmodic, irregular fashion.

The uncertain light threw flashes on the wall, fitfully illuminating the solitary picture which hung there with a wreath of flowers at its base. Hedwig's eyes rested there often; they turned there instinctively with the weary habit acquired by long years; but there was something unusual in their glance to-day—something nearer resignation and less like regret than had ever been there before.

The brawling voice of the wind outside cheated the watchful listener, and it was not until Othmar, with rain- and mud-be-spattered travelling cloak, flung open the door, that she was aware of his arrival.

Without a word he came up to her and raised her hand to his lips.

"Have you found him?" was Hedwig's only words of greeting.

"Yes, I have found him."

Othmar let himself sink exhaustedly into a seat straight opposite his wife, and as he did so she noticed how pale and agitated he was looking.

"Is he the right man? Have you assured yourself of his identity? What are the proofs?"

Her eyes were devouring his face; but Othmar merely answered wearily, like a man who is loth to be questioned—

"He is the right man; I have assured myself of it."

"There is no mistake, no doubt?"

"Not the shadow of a doubt."

"But the proofs—the proofs?"

"I tell you that I saw his papers, held them in my hand. They are all in order, proving without possibility of doubt that he is as genuine a Pfeilhofen as any of those that adorn our long family tree."

Hedwig's face sank into her hands; a storm of triumph, which was for the moment unmixed and undisturbed, swept through her heart. A Pfeilhofen alive! A Pfeilhofen who could carry on the name and save the family from extinction!

"Hedwig! you are weeping!" cried Othmar, alarmed.

"I am thanking God for this great mercy! But speak, for Heaven's sake! How is it? He is Konrad's great-grandson, is he not?"

"His grandson. His father, Everardo, was Konrad's son, and therefore first cousin to my own father."

"His grandson! Ah! Then he cannot be young?"

"He is thirty-six—just four years younger than I am myself."

"Has he a wife?" asked Hedwig breathlessly. "Children? A son, perhaps?"

"He is unmarried."

"Ah!" said Hedwig, and then lapsed into silence for a

minute. "But go on. How was your first meeting with him? Was he aware of the relationship?"

"It was this way. Before approaching him directly I made some general inquiries about him first, from my former friends. My old acquaintances stared at me at first as though I had risen from the dead. When I inquired about Frecciacorte, adding that I believed him to be related to our family, and pointing out the resemblance of the name, they all began to wonder how it was that they had not discovered the fact before, which was a polite way of saying that they had forgotten the existence of the Pfeilhofen name. Then I went to Frecciacorte. My reception there was not what I expected; he did not attempt to meet me half-way. I had, so to say, to force the relationship upon him. He showed no surprise, only a supreme coolness. At last, half reluctantly, he consented to show me his papers, and the result is what I told you."

There were yet more questions to be answered, more details to be elicited before the countess was half satisfied. Everything was now as simple as an unravelled knot—the money for the mortuary masses had been sent by Everardo Frecciacorte, the father of the present marquis, to whom Konrad, on his deathbed, had intrusted the duty of having masses said for the souls of Leonora and Wilibald von Pfeilhofen. When Hedwig asked why the letter accompanying the money had been merely sent to the village priest instead of to the castle, Othmar replied—

"I do not know; the father must have been as little anxious to claim kinship with us as is the son."

"And the cause of this reluctance? Have you ascertained it? Is it nothing but a survival of the old quarrel between Wilibald and Konrad?"

Othmar's foot tapped the floor nervously.

"I have not ascertained anything, but I have guessed much."

His wife's eye rested on him searchingly; he started up from his chair, and going to the window stood staring out into the dark and stormy night.

"Hedwig!" he cried, turning round impulsively, "the reason is that they are poor and that we are rich; that they have had to live in gilded slavery, while we are as free as the princes they serve."

"Poor!" repeated Hedwig, in surprise.

"Yes, that man who accepted my cousinship with such cool indifference is poor as a church mouse, and proud as only a devil or a Pfeilhofen can be. It is the knaves only that fatten themselves at court, not the honest men. He wears a gold chain round his neck, it is true, and silk stockings in public, but the room in which he received me was bare as a monastic cell. And when I gave him my hand at parting, I could not help remarking that his coat was worn at the wrists. When I asked him why he had waited for me to take the first step, he gave a peculiar smile and answered—

"'I have lived long in the world, and have observed many things, and among the things that I have observed is the fact that poor relations are rarely welcome. I did not care to take the risk of being considered an intruder.' And when he said that, Hedwig, I—I did not know how to answer him."

There was a short pause, the silence only broken by the shrieking of the wind round the angles of the turrets.

"You have done nothing beyond claiming the relationship, of course?" said Hedwig, in a measured tone of voice.

"Nothing else."

This time the silence was longer; up to this moment there had been neither discussion nor speculation as to what should eventually be done should a descendant of Konrad's actually be traced. As though by common consent, this point had been left untouched between husband and wife. But now the moment had come which must bring the unavoidable question: What is to be done?

Othmar had known no peace so long as the existence of Konrad's possible descendants was still shrouded in mystery; his mind had followed up every vague conjecture with restless activity; but now that the mystery was solved, that this apocryphal relative had suddenly stepped out from the

shrouding shadows and had assumed palpable dimensions—nay more, that he himself had willingly sought him out and pressed the kinship upon him, there rushed over him the thought that he had been a fool for his pains. Why had he not let the matter rest, instead of foolishly overthrowing that convenient barrier of ignorance, or indifference, erected between them by Konrad's grandson?

These musings were now vain. Eberhard's will was there, and Konrad's grandson was there as well, and the relationship between them had been openly acknowledged; and now at last the question must be faced and asked: What is to be done?

It was after that long silence that Othmar asked it. He had waited for Hedwig to speak; but she had sat silent in her chair.

"Hedwig!" he cried, bending forward and clutching hold of her dress as though to seek there support, "I can bear these torturing doubts and questionings no longer. Tell me, in pity's sake, what is to be done?"

"You have made no plan, then?" said Hedwig, slowly raising her eyes and looking him full in the face.

He shook his head.

"Then listen to me, Othmar. The question is a very simple one, and the courses that are open to us but few. If that will prove valid"—

"It is valid by the law of our land," interrupted Othmar. "I informed myself upon the point at legal authorities in the capital."

"That was imprudent."

"I did so prudently; there were no suspicions aroused. And as for my interest in Frecciacorte, that required no explanation, since it is known that I have no son."

"The will, then, is valid," repeated Hedwig more slowly, "and in that case the Marquis Frecciacorte is the actual legal possessor of the entire Pfeilhofen domains. And not that only; you must likewise remember that, according to this will, the Pfeilhofen estates already belonged by rights to his father and his grandfather; that they never were rightfully Wilibald's, never rightfully Walter's, never yours, since at the moment

when Konrad fled the country, seventy-nine years ago, he was then already, unbeknown to himself, the legal possessor of the estates."

Othmar shuddered visibly at this plain statement of the facts, and put his hands up over his face.

"Oh, hush, Hedwig! hush, I cannot bear it!"

"Is it not the truth?"

"That is just why I am unable to bear it, I who have so lately seen him in a bare room and with his threadbare sleeves."

"The room can be furnished and the sleeve made whole again," said the countess, in a singularly calm tone of voice. "You have only to publish the discovery of the will, and it is our sleeves that will turn threadbare then."

Othmar gazed at his wife with haggard eyes. He did not understand her calmness.

"Beggars ourselves by our own act?" he stammered.

"There are different degrees of beggary," returned Hedwig. "We should not actually starve. I even believe that certain provisions would be made by the law."

"Hedwig, you are mocking me!" cried Othmar, staring at his wife's inscrutable face. "There is some other thought in your mind?"

"I am not mocking you, I am only speaking the simple truth. Should the marquis come to his rights, he might very likely prefer to live in the capital. He might lend you the castle, you know; and no doubt he is no hunter. Italians rarely are, so possibly he will give you the free run of the hunting *revier*."

"Never!" muttered Othmar between his teeth. "Never shall my foot enter the Pfeilhofen gates again, from the moment they cease to be mine!"

He was pale with the passion which his wife's last words had aroused in him. He now stood there before her with clenched hands and dilated nostrils, a picture of haughty, handsome, but helpless pride; while Hedwig, leaning back in her chair, regarded him with a glance that looked like triumph.

"You will not publish the will, and you do not enjoy the prospect of becoming a beggar?" she said, swiftly changing her tone. "Then take the other course. Burn the will, suppress it. Stuff it back into the old book where it was found. Leave it to be discovered over again some hundred years hence. It might have been so but for a mere chance. Suppress the will, and leave the Italian marquis to darn his torn sleeves as best he can."

Othmar sank down again with a groan.

"False, false," he murmured. "A stain on my honour, and a crime in the eye of the law!"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It is hard to advise you. You lack the abnegation for the first, and the moral courage for the second course I have proposed."

"Hedwig, Hedwig! Is there no other alternative? No third course?"

His wife gazed at him with a long, keen glance which contained almost as much pity as contempt, with, moreover, some element of piercing scrutiny, as though she would read the inmost workings of his soul. She had desired to work him up to a certain phase of mind before laying aside the mask, and now she told herself that he had reached it.

"Yes, there is one other course," she said slowly.

"Hedwig!" He threw himself on his knees beside her chair, gazing up at her with expectant eyes like a pagan worshipper consulting the oracle upon whom his fate depends. Just thus had he knelt many a time, and even thus he had gazed when he, a handsome, fair-haired boy in his teens, had come to his cousin for counsel or consolation, and the cold blue eyes that had looked down upon him with a sort of disdainful compassion bore the same expression as twenty years ago.

"There is another course, Othmar. I shall tell it to you presently, but listen to me first." Her manner had now changed, her tone had dropped that ring of inscrutable mockery which had so tantalised Othmar but a few minutes

previously. "I too have thought over this matter, Othmar; I too shudder at the thought of exchanging Pfeilhofen for a form of more or less genteel starvation; and I too would be too proud to accept even one crumb from the compassion of the man whose rights had once been openly acknowledged. But oh, Othmar, I too could weep tears of blood at the thought of leaving these walls where our infancy was passed; every tree, every turret cries out to me, 'Stay! we are yours, and you are ours!' That I should not survive the removal is certain; that the marquis would invite us to remain here is almost equally certain; and that I should refuse his offer is most certain of all. But I have another plan."

"I can guess your plan," interrupted Othmar eagerly. "You want me to name him as my heir. To entail the estate henceforth upon the male line direct, and give Luitgard merely a daughter's portion?"

"And in the meantime leave the Marquis Frecciacorte to go on starving and wearing threadbare clothes for ten, twenty, thirty years longer perhaps?" suggested Hedwig ironically. "Did you not say just now that he is only four years younger than you are yourself? So the chances of his outliving you can scarcely weigh in the balance here."

"That is true," said Othmar despondently; "whichever way we look at it, there is only misery staring us in the face. Oh, how I wish that these hateful questions had never been raised! We were not particularly happy before, but the true wretchedness only began upon the day when we heard that a descendant of Konrad's still existed."

"And I shall always bless that day," said Hedwig steadily. "Even had I never known about Eberhard's will, I should have been ready to welcome a surviving Pfeilhofen as a direct gift of Heaven. Until that day I had but one fixed object in life, and that object had failed me."

"Oh, hush!" said Othmar, with a pleading gesture.

"No, let me speak. It is not by mincing words and covering up old wounds that we shall see our way through this tangled business. Let me speak calmly, Othmar.

When I married you, I did so at the cost of a great sacrifice—of which you know, for I have concealed nothing from you—and I made this sacrifice with the hope of giving you a son and so continuing the Pfeilhofen name. That son was given us. He lived but a few hours, taking with him to the grave, not only my broken heart, but, as I then believed, the last hope of saving the name of Pfeilhofen from extinction. But now all is changed. A Pfeilhofen still lives, and is, moreover, the rightful possessor of our estates. The question therefore to be solved, supposing that we do not wish the will to become public, is the following: How can the Marquis Frecciaccorte be most rapidly benefited by the fortune which is virtually his own, and of which undoubtedly he stands in such sore need? The answer is simple: By becoming our son-in-law."

"You mean—that Luitgard"—stammered Othmar, starting to his feet. "But Luitgard is a child, and Frecciaccorte is old enough to be her father."

"Possibly. That has nothing to do with it. Children of seventeen can marry, and so can men of fifty; and Frecciaccorte is only thirty-six. Even if he were fifty, that could make no difference: she would not be likely to find out that her husband was old until she had compared him to other men. By what standard should she measure him here? By viewing him alongside of Bitterbalg or Gottschalk perhaps? No doubt he will compare favourably with either of them. She will not think of objecting to him, and if she will not take him with a good grace"—

"Then the plan must be abandoned, of course."

"Then she must take him against her will," murmured the countess to herself; for the words, if plainly spoken, might have alarmed Othmar.

"But are you so sure of success? Frecciaccorte is a sort of genteel beggar, and Luitgard is ostensibly the richest heiress in the country. He will be too proud to woo her."

The countess appeared to be reflecting deeply.

"No doubt his pride will be an obstacle, but possibly that

may be smoothed over if he is made to understand that he is conferring a benefit by taking back our name. Leave me to manage him. At all events, the plan is worth a trial; and in the meantime go and fetch Luitgard."

"Luitgard?" asked Othmar, surprised. "Do you mean to say that you are going to tell her?"

"I shall tell her nothing; but bring her at once."

Othmar still lingered, hesitating. To fetch Luitgard would be like the final surrender of the position, and he had not yet told himself distinctly that he had accepted his wife's plan. His inclination, his comfort, his interest, everything in fact, pushed him to accept it; his conscience alone still feebly demurred. But his conscience might be pacified by a compromise. Having spent the greater part of his life in arranging these little compromises, he had acquired a certain dexterity in the practice, and he was now asking himself what compromise was possible under present circumstances?

"I suppose, Hedwig," he suggested diffidently, "that if Frecciacorte really became our son-in-law there could be no reason why the will should not be published after the marriage? It might just as well have been discovered after the marriage as before; so these few weeks' delay could really not signify."

"Stop, Othmar," said the countess. "You suppose quite wrong. There must be no misunderstanding between us as to what we are doing. Either we desire to suppress the will or to publish it; and once suppressed, it cannot matter for how long. Are you prepared to face Frecciacorte when he learns the truth of the stratagem? And that he will find it out sooner or later is certain. Why, even Luitgard might betray it unwittingly, since it was from her that you got the parchment."

Othmar felt the drops of cold perspiration rising on his forehead.

"It is a crime in the eyes of the law," he faltered.

"And a crime, however nominal, however ephemeral, requires courage. I have the courage for it, Othmar, but the only

question is: Have you? Had Kunibert lived, I should never have required to ask this question, for the matter would have been decided long ago."

"How?"

"I should have burnt Eberhard's will, curse and all, as soon as it was found," returned Hedwig calmly. "Can you suppose that I would have had a moment's hesitation?"

Othmar met her unflinching glance, and shuddered. It was difficult to say whether admiration, or fear of his wife was uppermost in his feelings just then. He did not doubt that what she said was true, as little as he had doubted when, seventeen years ago, on the day when his twin children were born, Hedwig, lying with marble white face and dilated blue eyes, had said to him, as she gazed at the children lying in the cradle alongside, "I could willingly strangle the girl myself, Othmar, if I knew that her death would save the boy." She had aroused his shuddering admiration then, as something between a monster and a heroine; and as he now stood and gazed at her to-night, similar conflicting feelings were struggling in his mind.

"Have you decided?" said the countess at last.

He gave no direct answer beyond saying, "I shall fetch Luitgard." But Hedwig knew that he had surrendered.

CHAPTER XI

LUITGARD'S PREPARATION

AS the door closed behind Othmar, Hedwig sank back exhausted in her chair. The blood hammered with dull throbs in her temples, for the strain of the past half-hour had been great. She knew that her husband was now as wax in her hands, but the stake for which she had been playing was a very high one; and a man who is both impulsive and undecided is an awkward instrument to handle. To her as well as to Othmar these last weeks had been weeks of sore struggle; she also had her doubts, she also had a conscience; but, unlike Othmar, she made no compromises with it. She had looked at the bare truth without any of those shroudings with which Othmar sought to disguise it; she had gauged all possibilities, sounded the depths of that passionate attachment wherewith each of her heartstrings twined round the walls of Pfeilhofen, and for the sake of that attachment, she had resolved to take upon herself the risk of a crime, which, however, if her plans worked as correctly as she was determined they should, would be but the mere nominal semblance of a crime. To Frecciacorte's father and grandfather it was not in her power to restore their lost rights, but she would do so to the living Frecciacorte of to-day by making him her son-in-law. As Luitgard's husband, therefore, well clothed, well fed, and the virtual master of Pfeilhöfen, the result would be practically the same as though Eberhard's will had been published and put into effect.

While she mused thus the door opened, and Luitgard

came in with her father. It was late in the evening now, and Luitgard, surprised at so unexpected a summons, had come with her hair hanging loose about her shoulders; for she had been in the act of combing it out for the night when Othmar had come to fetch her. She came forward timidly into the circle of light, looking at her mother pale and expectant, as though awaiting some decree of fate from her lips. She stopped instinctively at two paces from the arm-chair, dropping the formal curtsey which she had been taught since childhood, as she pronounced the usual stereotyped formula—

“What are your commands?”

In the daily ceremony the countess usually extended her hand, which Luitgard kissed in the German fashion of those days. But this evening it was different. Hedwig forgot to extend her hand; her eyes hung on her daughter with a keenly scrutinising gaze, into which gradually there dawned an element of surprise. It was as though she were looking at Luitgard for the first time. She gazed at her from head to foot as at something newly discovered; her eyes rested longest on the flood of silky gold which hung over her shoulders like a cloak, shining like pale amber in the light of the waxen tapers.

“Come nearer, Luitgard,” she said; and Luitgard silently obeyed.

“Who is it that combs your hair? Who dresses it every day?”

“I comb it myself at night, and Walpurga does my plaits in the morning.”

“Your hair must be better cared for in future. I do not like the way you wear it. You are no longer a child. You were seventeen in April, and should give more care to your appearance.”

Luitgard was far too much amazed to utter even a monosyllable. She did not know which was more astonishing—that her mother should express any desire with regard to her appearance, or that she should remember that she had been seventeen in April.

"And your frocks, too," went on the countess; "they are all out of fashion, and cannot be worn any longer. I shall write to Buxenburg, and get new ones; and we must have an experienced tirewoman. Blue or pale green would suit you; for pink you are too pale."

She looked at Luitgard almost as though she expected some sign of pleasure. But Luitgard merely listened, attentive, surprised, but indifferent; asking herself whether it was her mother who was talking in her sleep, or she herself who was dreaming? What did she care for blue or green frocks? She had never seen any.

"You are wondering why I have sent for you?" resumed the countess, still in this same tone so new to Luitgard. "Your father has just returned from the capital. He has renewed old acquaintances, and made some new ones. It is very probable that we shall have some visitors soon. I am thinking of arranging some hunting parties for autumn. Now that you are seventeen, it will be expected that you should see something of the world. My health renders it quite impossible that I should take you to the capital; but at least we can see our neighbours here from time to time. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Luitgard, plunged in bewilderment.

"Shall you not be glad of the change?"

"I don't know."

The countess glanced at her daughter inquiringly, and then said—

"It is late. You look tired, and had better go to bed. Early hours are very important for the complexion, and your complexion must not be neglected."

She extended her hand, and Luitgard kissed it, and would have retired; but the countess kept her daughter's hand a moment longer within her own.

"You must never go out without gloves," she remarked. "It would be a pity to tan your hands." Then, quite unexpectedly, she drew down Luitgard's face, and kissed her on the forehead.

Was it Luitgard's fancy merely, or was not this kiss a shade less icy than any she had formerly known? And in her mother's eye was there not some glance a degree softer and more gracious than usual?

There are one or two moments in life when it needs but a feather's weight to decide the balance. There are one or two tides which, taken at the flood, may secure our happiness. Perhaps such a moment had now come in Luitgard's life. Had any responding spark of emotion, by word or gesture, answered to the newly kindled feeling within the mother's heart, it was possible that even now that proud, forlorn heart would have let itself be vanquished. It was not yet too late to have thawed into life the mother's love, the mother's instinct, which was there all the time, but had been frozen to ice under the breath of misfortune.

But a neglected child cannot be won back by a mere word or caress. Some instinct within Luitgard's breast rose up in rebellion against this belated symptom of an interest whereof until now she had been deemed unworthy. Perhaps the latent memory of just another such moment in her life, when her heart had been famishing for that love she no longer cared to have, may have risen up before her mind just now as she stood before her mother cold and unmoved. Obedience, of course, she owed to her parents; this creed had been instilled into her since earliest childhood; but her heart and her affection, they were her own, to withhold or bestow as she chose.

So she received her mother's kiss in silence, and then, after another short, uncomfortable silence, merely said—

"May I go now?"

"You may go," said the countess, dropping her daughter's hand with a sudden change of tone. That was the voice daily heard by Luitgard. The spark of warmth, if indeed it had ever been there, was gone; the tide had ebbed. She gave her usual wave of the hand, and Luitgard, dropping another formal curtsy, walked out of the room.

All this time Othmar had stood at a little distance watching his wife and his daughter.

"Well, Hedwig?" he said at last, when Luitgard had closed the door behind her.

"She will do," said the countess. Then, after a second's pause, "The child is beautiful; she has got Leonora's eyes."

"Yes, yes," agreed Othmar readily. It had occurred to him once or twice before that his daughter was growing beautiful, but he would not have dared to mention the fact to Hedwig. He was gratified now at her spontaneous recognition of it.

"But beauty alone is not sufficient," went on the countess. "She has a strange look, so dazed and scared; or is it perhaps that she is stupid, and incapable of emotion?"

"She was taken by surprise," said Othmar apologetically.

"There was something more than surprise in her expression," went on Hedwig musingly; "she will require some preparation, some rousing, before it will be safe to let Frecciacorte meet her. She must have a companion, a girl of her own age, who will force her to talk and to take interest in laces and lovers. You must write to your mother to-morrow, and tell her to lose no time in seeking out and despatching the liveliest girl in the Grand Duchy of Buxenburg."

Many letters were written within the next week, all with a view to catching up some of the hundred and one little threads which go to compose that vast spider's net termed Society, out of which the Pfeilhofens had insensibly slipped for nearly a score of years. The names of half-forgotten acquaintances were hunted up, amid much speculation as to which of these former contemporaries of Othmar and Hedwig had meanwhile reproduced themselves by matrimony and offspring, or had gone to their long homes. And of those that now remained, which families would prove desirable associates under present circumstances? Then there was the question of fashion to be considered; for it was important to ascertain what kind of sacques, stomachers, and panniers were most worn at present at the court of Buxenburg, and in what precise fashion the hair should be dressed.

With regard to all these latter details, the dowager countess

was a valuable and infallible oracle, no one being better qualified to gauge the precise value of a piece of lace or select to a nicety the colour and costume most befitting any special occasion. But there were other points upon which her judgment and discretion were less reliable, and it was with a frown of annoyance that Othmar one day repaired to Hedwig's chamber with an open letter in his hand.

"What is the matter?" asked Hedwig, her sharp glance having detected that something was amiss. "Has your mother not found a companion for Luitgard?"

"Yes, she has found someone—but"—

"But what? Is she not young enough? Nor lively enough? You know I expressly stipulated that the girl must be lively and talkative; in every way the exact reverse of what Luitgard is."

"She is only sixteen, and is the noisiest girl in the country, writes my mother, who compares her to one of Frecciacorte's windmills, or a musical box gone mad."

"Why, that is the very thing we require! And is she well born? What is her name?"

"Her name," said Othmar, with an effort, "is Wulfhild von Winkelried."

Hedwig made a sudden movement, as if in pain.

"Not his daughter?" she said at last, in a low voice.

Othmar merely nodded.

"His daughter! Wolfram von Winkelried's daughter!" repeated Hedwig to herself.

"It was an unpardonable oversight on my mother's part not to have remembered all about the past," resumed Othmar hurriedly and haltingly. "But it is evident that her memory is beginning to go with regard to everything not connected with dress or court festivities. For names especially she has no recollection. These Winkelried girls—there are three of them, it seems, of which this one is the eldest—have been left in very straitened circumstances since the father's death, so not unnaturally one of them was suggested to my mother as a suitable person to choose."

"I see," said Hedwig reflectively. "So they are poor! I had never heard of that."

"Very poor, it seems. The father spent all his wife's money in cards and dice. He was not a good husband, they say," he concluded, with a wistful glance at his wife.

Hedwig smiled strangely.

"Of course not. Why should he have been? He never loved her!"

"But the most awkward thing," resumed Othmar presently, referring to the date of his mother's letter, "is that by this time Fräulein von Winkelried must already be on her way here. What is to be done in order to put her off without giving offence? If I sent post-horses at once, it might still be possible to stop her before she reaches Pfeilhofen."

"You shall do nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Hedwig vehemently. "It is Fate that has sent her to us. Let her come by all means. If Wolfram Winkelried's daughter is at all like her father, her presence will be sufficient to bring sunshine into the darkest house!"

On the day following this conversation, Luitgard, summoned downstairs to the large saloon, found her father there in conversation with a girl of about her own age. That is to say, he was standing listening with an expression of wearied but polite resignation, to the voluble and lively description the young lady was giving of her journey hither.

"You did not expect me so soon, I warrant?" she was saying as Luitgard opened the door, "and if those sleepy postillions and lazy, well-fed horses had had their way, no doubt I should be still sticking in the mud twenty leagues from here. But I cannot abide anything slow either in man or beast, so I just borrowed a coachman's whip at one of the halting stations, and applied it according to my notions. You should have seen the postillions' faces! And didn't the horses just wake up as if it had been the Day of Judgment, and I an archangel blowing the trumpet! It was enough to make one die of laughing, I assure you. But then I promised them all, men and horses, a double share of ale and oats on arriving, and that was an

argument that appeared to penetrate even their thick addle-pates. I really could not have survived another day in the travelling coach, shut up there all by myself with no one to talk to. My poor tongue is positively stiff from want of practice. It is just like when a foot goes to sleep. Don't you know the feeling?"

Without waiting for an answer, she rattled on again—

"And what am I expected to do now that I am here? You see I came away in such a hurry that I quite forgot to ask whether it was a governess, a dancing mistress, or a sicknurse that you are in want of? Have you got many daughters? And have they got pretty names? Have they learned to dance the new court minuet? I can show them the step. Not that I care for minuets myself; they are slow, stupid things, and if I only had my way— Ah! is that one of them?" she cried, catching sight of Luitgard standing in the open doorway.

"This is Luitgard, my only daughter," said Othmar, now at last being able to put in a word. "I hope that you will be"—

But Wulfhild had already sprung forward, and seizing Luitgard by both hands, turned her round forcibly towards the window.

"Look at me!" she exclaimed. "Do you like me? I am to be your friend, but only if you promise to be fond of me. If you don't want me, I shall go away at once. My hair is quite black, but I am not so wicked as I look, and I don't think I could ever be angry with you. Now look at me well, and make up your mind quick."

She paused, still holding Luitgard's hands, and Luitgard gazed back with all her eyes, but gave no answer. Wulfhild somehow overpowered her: and yet she did not dislike what she saw. The new-comer was unusually tall, nearly half a head taller than Luitgard, and broad in proportion. Her hair, as she had said, was quite black, and grew thick and low on the forehead. It was a forcibly handsome face, somewhat wanting in delicacy of colour and outline, but having a barbaric beauty not to be denied; a face full of energy, bearing already the stamp of passions awakened in the lines of mouth and chin; the eyebrows were black and straight, and from

the dark eyes a singular glare, as of yellow light, escaped at moments of excitement or emotion. Every one of her movements—the tone of her voice, the flash of her eye—suggested a surplus of vital and mental force that imperiously demanded an outlet.

"Have you not yet made up your mind?" asked Wulfhild. "Mine is made up long ago. I like you, but I want to hear whether I am to go or stay? Will you have me for your friend?"

Luitgard's first impulse had been to answer that she had one friend already, and wanted no other; but she remembered in time that this would have betrayed Delius.

"You can stay," she answered slowly.

Wulfhild drew her heavy eyebrows together.

"Is that all? 'You can stay.' Is that to be all my welcome? Why do you not say more? or else why do you not send me away?"

"But I don't want to send you away."

Wulfhild stared half incredulously.

"You want me to stay, and yet you have not more to say to me! How strange you are! Are you not fond of talking?"

Luitgard shook her head.

"How curious," said Wulfhild, with the accent of a wine-lover who is told that someone does not care for wine. "Now I always talk—that is to say, when I am in a good temper. When I am angry I talk more, but when I am very angry then I am silent."

She gave a ringing laugh.

"Perhaps you are wishing that I may always be very angry?"

"Oh no," said Luitgard. "I am fond of listening."

"Then we cannot fail to be fast friends!" cried Wulfhild, overjoyed, and she flung her arm round Luitgard's neck and gave her on each cheek a kiss which caused her delicate skin to flush and tingle.

Impossible as it would have seemed in theory, yet Wulfhild took her place quite naturally among these people who had

been buried so long behind their castle walls as to have forgotten the world outside. She startled them all considerably at first, it is true, and at moments Othmar, as he listened to her ceaseless flow of talk, wondered greatly as to whether the course they had adopted for rousing Luitgard would not prove over violent. But it is marvellous how rapidly old habits are replaced by new ones, and gradually, in some small way or other, the entire household began to feel the vivifying influence of Wulfhild's personality. The torpid, monotonous flow of their life had received fresh and unwonted stimulus, like a mountain torrent breaking up the waters of some even sluggish stream. They had hitherto lived in the past only, while she was the impersonification of the warm, pulsating, living present. She shook them out of the vain, useless dreams of a dead past, substituting newer, more tangible interests and fresher ideas. She taught Luitgard how to dress her hair as it was worn in the capital, and forced Othmar to take her with him to the forest whenever he went out hunting. Even the want of respect she displayed towards the ancient emblems of the house, had something invigorating about it. The darkest family legends failed to awe her to silence; she was cynical and incredulous regarding the most sacred traditions, and made critical remarks upon the execution of the family portraits, which Luitgard had hitherto regarded as crowning masterpieces of art. She even ventured to address Bitterbalg as "old pickle herring," and pulled about his precious seals in a manner which made the little hair he still could boast of stand up straight on his head.

"Graf Kunibert could not have been worse," the old man would say to himself with a mournful shake of the head, as he rearranged the scattered sheets which Wulfhild had left lying all over the room. "And if my collection is to be destroyed, I should prefer it to be sacrificed to one of the family rather than to a stranger!"

As for Luitgard, she passed the first few days in a species of stupefaction hard to describe. There was so much to wonder at about Wulfhild that she did not know with which

item to begin. Perhaps the thing which astonished her most was the complete absence of fear that Wulfhild displayed towards the countess. At all hours of the day, and just as her fancy suggested, Wulfhild would invade Hedwig's room, and apparently found a welcome there. She neither lowered her voice nor hushed her step on entering the invalid's chamber, and yet its entrance was never forbidden her.

By degrees the rousing process began to show symptoms of success. Luitgard's answers grew longer and more frequent, and now and then she would even hazard a question regarding Wulfhild's former associates or the life of the capital. It was a very slow awakening, very gradual, and naturally far from complete as yet, but, such as it was, Hedwig was satisfied with its results, and when Wulfhild had been a fortnight at Castle Pfeilhofen the countess said to her husband—

"You can prepare her now for the visit of the Marquis Frecciaccorte. There is no necessity for further delay."

Accordingly, on that same day, it was announced to Luitgard and to the household generally that the Marchese Frecciaccorte, lately arrived at the court of Buxenburg, had been ascertained to be nearly related to the Pfeilhofen family, that the relationship was now openly acknowledged, and that the marchese had accepted an invitation to pass a fortnight at Pfeilhofen.

Luitgard received the news with something which almost resembled excitement; for it was not in vain that she had studied the family history since childhood, had, so to say, been nourished and had grown up upon it. Her heart fluttered at the thought that she was going to see the man who was actually the grandson of that very Konrad whose story she knew by heart; who had galloped away upon the white charger while Wilibald lay bleeding upon the floor of the Herons' Tower. Othmar marked these symptoms with pleasure. "She takes an interest in him already," he said to himself. "All will go well, and everybody will be satisfied."

Wulfhild, meanwhile, had made her own private remarks on the subject. "This Pfeilhofen butterfly," she reflected, "who

has issued so abruptly from a Frecciacorte chrysalis, is of course a very important discovery to a Pfeilhofen who has no son. Circumstances, therefore, combine to point him out as a very fitting husband for Luitgard. But wherefore this desperate hurry about the whole matter? What are they afraid of?"

She was reflecting thus on the eve of the day upon which the marquis was expected to arrive at Pfeilhofen. Luitgard had just been trying on one of her new dresses, and had submitted to have her pale golden hair piled up high above her forehead according to what Wulfhild assured her was the newest thing in fashion.

Luitgard scarcely recognised herself as she looked at her own reflection in the mirror. Why had her life so suddenly changed its current? Why had she all at once become an object of such general attention and interest? Why did her father watch her so strangely at times? There were moments when she had caught his eye fixed upon her with a glance of inquiry, almost of anxiety.

"How dismal you look to-day, Luitgard," said Wulfhild suddenly. "Is it the new gown or the way your hair is done that has had such a depressing effect? You look exactly like the portrait of that lugubrious Leonora downstairs. If you only sat down to the spinnet, and dislocated your neck by looking over your shoulder, you would be her very image. And you are just as lively too, and quite as talkative."

"Why do you always laugh at our pictures?" said Luitgard reproachfully.

"There are too many of them. They become oppressive in such numbers. It is like living perpetually in a crowd—and a crowd that has only got one side to it. I like statues better, for at least you can walk round a statue and see what there is at the other side."

"We have statues too, in the park," said Luitgard.

Wulfhild laughed immoderately:

"Those moss-grown clumps of stone! My statues, the statues I love, are very different. They are of marble, all

smooth and white and shining, and although silent they are never wearisome. Not far from our old tumbledown castle there is another castle more tumbledown still. It stood empty for years, then suddenly one day an old man, a sculptor, rented the house and set up his tent there. He had been travelling for years in the East, and had now come home to make statues. And his statues were beautiful! Whenever I felt too restless at home, I used to run over and visit them. Then I walked about for hours among the blocks of marble until I got as quiet as the statues themselves. And then—ah, then! There was one statue”—

The yellow light had come suddenly into her eyes. She broke off, and sat silent for so long that Luitgard looked up in surprise. Wulfhild was leaning her chin in her hand, staring out straight in front of her as though she saw some vision in the air. At moments like these, her straight brows and sullenly closed lips gave an expression of almost repelling fierceness to her face. These moments had occurred once or twice in Luitgard's experience of her new friend. They presented an absolute contrast to her usual flow of excessive high spirits, but as yet these interludes had been of short duration.

A minute later she had come out of her dream, and started what was apparently a totally irrelevant subject.

"Have you ever felt very happy?" she asked—"so happy that the sky seemed a great deal too low for you and the world a great deal too narrow? No? I thought not. Or have you ever been so unhappy that you felt inclined to lie down on the ground and press your face into the earth so as to shut out the sunlight, and put your hands over your ears so as not to hear the birds sing?"

"I have never done that," said Luitgard.

"Then you don't know what life is. You are still asleep. I have done both, and I daresay I shall do both again. Ah!" She heaved an impatient sigh, and began fiercely tearing to pieces a rose that lay on the table. "Have you ever had a secret?" she asked presently.

"A secret? Yes, I have one." And a smile of childish

triumph came to Luitgard's lips. Was not Delius her secret? a precious secret, a beautiful secret locked up in her heart—to be shared by none!

"Charming!" cried Wulfhild, clapping her hands, all her desperate earnest of a while ago dispelled as by magic. "Tell it to me! What is it like? Has it got two legs and a head? Secrets usually have at your age, you know. Does it make you happy or unhappy?"

Luitgard reflected. "Of course it makes me happy."

Wulfhild gave her a keen glance. "Take care," she said. "I think it would be better for you if you had no secret after all. It is not the right preparation for receiving your august cousin, the Marquis of Frecciacorte. If you take my advice, you will cut up your secret into small pieces before your cousin arrives."

"But I don't understand," began Luitgard.

"Oh, never mind. I sometimes get to thinking aloud, that is all. Let us change the subject. Are you not curious to see your cousin? Don't you wonder whether his eyes are black or blue or green? And whether his nose is long or short, straight or stumpy?"

"I wonder whether he will be like the portrait of his grandfather, Konrad," returned Luitgard simply.

"Is that all the interest you take in him as yet? Well, perhaps, that will do as a beginning. A sort of foundation whereon to embroider," concluded Wulfhild, *sotto voce*.

CHAPTER XII

REFLECTIONS

THE marquis was expected to arrive late in the evening, towards nine or ten o'clock, and the countess had issued her orders accordingly, regarding Luitgard's attire and the manner in which the reception was to take place. But the dispositions of the most despotic tyrant may sometimes be thwarted by chance, and chance on this particular occasion had decreed that the Marchese Frecciacorte was first to behold his cousin without the accessories of powdered hair, lace ruffles, or the new blue gown.

There would be plenty time to dress that evening after dark, argued Luitgard to herself. Her head was aching from the effect of the torturing coiffures it had been subjected to these past days, so letting her long fair locks hang unfettered down her back, and with only a dark green woollen scarf flung round her shoulders as protection against the chilly October air, she left the house and bent her steps in the direction of the Herons' Tower.

It was now over three weeks since she had last seen Delius, and how much had happened within that space of time! All this week she had suffered from the thought that last Sunday he had probably waited for her in vain; for she had found it impossible to elude the vigilance of Wulfhild, and steal away to the trysting place. This was Sunday again, and she must see him, if only for a few minutes; and oh, how much she would have to tell him!

Yes, he was waiting for her now, pacing the gravel walk that ran round the little lake with a frowning brow, which, how-

ever, cleared slightly as she came in sight panting and rather dishevelled.

"Yes, I know I am a little late ; but indeed I could not help it," she said in answer to his vehement reproaches. "And oh, Delius, you cannot think how much has happened since I saw you last !"

"What has happened ?"

"First, I have got a new friend ; and then"—

But Delius interrupted her fiercely.

"A new friend ? What do you mean ? What is he like ?"

Luitgard was startled at the vehemence of his tone.

"But it is not he, it is a girl, with oh, such beautiful black hair and eyes, and so clever, and so brave !"

"A girl !" exclaimed Delius, in a tone of intense relief. "Why did you not say so at once ? You almost frightened me."

"Frightened you" — Luitgard was beginning, and then broke off, as there was a sound of approaching wheels on the broad carriage track, which at this part of the park cut through the chestnut alley at right angles. This drive was completely grass overgrown, being seldom used, and only a stranger to the place would have thought of approaching the house from this side.

"What can it be ?" said Delius. "No carriage ever passes this way."

Still holding her hand, he had approached to the very edge of the avenue, and was peering out through the branches at a heavily constructed yellow travelling carriage that was slowly approaching. The four bay horses bore marks of a long and fatiguing journey, for they had a dusty, jaded appearance, and looked as though the weight of the ponderous vehicle was overmuch for their strength. On the box beside the coachman was seated a stiff, upright figure in faded livery.

As the carriage reached the opening which led to the Herons' Tower it came to a sudden standstill, and the stiff liveried figure on the box began slowly to descend, and turning

the massive brass handle of the carriage door, proceeded to hold it open, standing as rigidly still the while as the stone statues round the tower. And presently from the depths of the yellow barouche there issued a second figure, as stiff as the first and almost as faded-looking, attired in a court dress of shabby brown velvet, relieved by touches of amber satin, with here and there the gleaming edge of a tarnished gold braid. As he stood there under the trees, he looked like some unreal fantastic apparition built up of the soft mellow tints of the decaying foliage around ; all the subdued melancholy radiance of the dying October day seemed to have concentrated itself at this one point, to take shape in this bizarre figure, seemingly the very embodiment of the spirit of autumn. Even the dead horse-chestnut leaves which, now changed into golden fans, were beginning to be profusely strewn over the grass, had the appearance of being as many fantastical ornaments, of right belonging to him, and the shining brown chestnuts everywhere escaping from their prickly shrouds might well have been buttons fallen from his coat.

Luitgard, gazing in profound amazement at this singular couple, had no thought of concealing herself till Delius seized her arm and drew her back behind the thick gnarled stem of a large double chestnut tree that afforded a secure and convenient shelter.

"Hush," he said in a whisper ; "they are coming this way."

The two faded figures, moving with a sort of automatic precision, had left the carriage road, and were advancing over the grass straight towards the tower. As they passed close by the tree behind which Luitgard and Delius were hidden, she was able to note that, in some inexplicable manner, one of the two quaint stiff figures was a yet stiffer, fainter, shabbier copy of the other one ; the resemblance between them seeming to suggest more than a mere outward likeness of dress and adjustment, as though, along with the old clothes, the domestic had likewise picked up some discarded manners and worn-out court graces of his master.

Having reached the edge of the pool, the two men came to a standstill, and the servant, taking from his pocket a small hand brush, began carefully to dust the gentleman's coat. Delius and Luitgard could hear the sound of their voices quite plainly, but the conversation was carried on in a foreign language, which to Luitgard at least was unintelligible.

"What is the use of it all?" said the gentleman wearily, when he had for some minutes submitted to the operations of his servant in silence. "Not all the brushing in the world will make my coat look new again, my good Basilio."

As he spoke he bent a little closer over the silent pool, in order to gain a better view of the image it reflected. The figure thrown back by the mirror was that of a tall man, well built, but slender almost to meagreness. The clean-cut features would have been handsome had the lips been less tightly closed with that fold of disdainful reticence which had become habitual, and had those pale blue eyes, that seemed like an anachronism in a face of Southern complexion, looked less sadly and wearily out into the world.

"No, no; it is of no use, Basilio," he said, when he had finished his survey. "Not all your fretting and fussing, your brushing and dusting, can make me look other than I am—a pauper nobleman."

"But not when I am standing alongside," said Basilio, with more eagerness than might have been expected from his shadowy appearance. "My coat is at least two shades more faded, and seen beside it the coat of the Signor Marchese looks almost—almost not old, does it not?"

The two figures staring down at their reflections in the water made a singular picture. Like a pair of old faded miniatures, their images were cast up on the surface of the green water; and certainly by comparison one of the two miniatures was considerably more faded-looking than the other.

"In certain unfavourable lights I admit that your excellency's appearance may look the reverse of wealthy," went on Basilio, beginning to pull about the lace ruffles which hung over his

master's wrists. "But then in life everything depends upon viewing things from an advantageous point of view. Even the most beautiful object in the world may be seen from an unfavourable point of view; and then, per Bacco! why, it ceases to be beautiful. We are only what we appear to be, and if we seem to be rich, that is every bit as good as being rich in reality."

"And if we seemed to have dined, is that every bit as good as having dined in reality?" put in the nobleman, with melancholy banter.

"Certainly," replied this curious philosopher readily. "Does not the proverb say that the stomach has no mirror? And who is there to tell that we have fasted on black bread and water if we only talk loud enough of the pheasants and lampreys which are causing us indigestion? No, it is not our stomachs which occasion us the most difficulty; there are other things more troublesome by far—not but what they too can be disposed of by a little power of combination. Now look at this ruffle, for instance," he continued, smoothing it out between his fingers. "Who is to know that this piece of lace is all torn and darned at the inner side if the Signor Marchese will only be careful to avoid unnecessary gesticulation; and as to the velvet coat, if you but remember to keep it disposed in a fitting light"—

"A fitting shade, you should rather say, Basilio."

"A fitting shade, if it so pleases you—then no one need guess that it has been on your excellency's back these three years and more. Viewed from a little distance, and especially if I but half close my eyes, it looks no more than just past its freshness; by my soul it does."

"And do you think, my good Basilio, that you can persuade all my haughty relatives to be considerate enough to look at me always at precisely the favourable distance and with half-closed eyes?" said the marchese rather wearily. But the servant continued unabashed—

"And by candlelight, moreover, I would be ready to cuff any fellow who dared to suggest that the velvet was not fresh

off the loom. It was on that account that I ventured to recommend the Signor Marchese to arrive at the castle late in the evening."

"And the driver has crossed your plans by taking a short cut," returned the master, with faint amusement. "And that is why you have been inventing so many ingenious pretexts to delay our arrival, and why you so earnestly requested me to step out of the carriage just now in order that you might relieve my dress of some purely imaginary dust? But now it is high time to get back into the carriage again, as I presume you do not propose to keep me waiting here indefinitely until the light is kind enough to accommodate itself to the precise hue of my coat?"

This was in truth what Basilio had been secretly contemplating, without, however, daring to express his wishes plainly, and it was with a regretful sigh for the becoming moonlight, still so distant, that he prepared to follow his master back to the carriage.

Luitgard and Delius, hidden behind the tree, had been furtively watching the scene, and by pushing her head as through a window, into the opening left between the two trunks, she had been able to follow every movement and gesture of the two men. It was with wonder, mixed with a little contempt, that Luitgard looked on, seeing nothing in the man before her but a sort of elderly Narcissus absorbed in complacent contemplation of his person. That is all she had guessed of the scene before her; and if the quicker eyes of Delius, and some possible knowledge of Italian, led him to a truer interpretation of the incident, he made no attempt to enlighten his companion.

The two faded figures, turning to go, had already proceeded a dozen steps, when abruptly the marchese veered round, having just missed his pocket-handkerchief, which had been dropped at the edge of the pool. His movement was so unexpected that Luitgard, who was now believing herself secure against detection and had craned her neck yet farther through the opening in order to look after the retreating figures, was

taken entirely by surprise, and too much confounded to think of drawing back.

Her astonishment was, however, exceeded by that of the marchese, thus suddenly brought face to face with the fairest vision it had ever been his fortune to behold. Not in the whole extensive collections of court beauties wherewith a twenty years' experience had furnished him, not in the art galleries of his native land, had he ever seen a picture as lovely, to his thinking, as what he now looked upon. A delicate, girlish face of a peculiarly refined and high-bred stamp; a pair of very startled blue eyes; and the dishevelled luxuriance of pale golden hair shed over neck and bosom and mingling with the tarnished amber glory of the withered horse-chestnut leaves. Of this charming apparition only the face and the beginning of the neck were visible, for the massive tree stem completely shrouded her figure from view; and, seen thus unexpectedly, she might well have passed muster for a woodland dryad peeping out shyly and anxiously from the tree that was her native abode.

The nobleman stood for about a minute, gazing with all his strength, as though he would print off indelibly upon his memory every detail of the picture before him; then the courtier's instinct resumed its sway, and found expression in a profound obeisance as deep and respectful as any bow executed before his royal master. When he raised his head again the vision had disappeared, and though he walked round to the other side of the tree, and shook out the heavy gnarled branches, there was nothing there to be seen; and though his eyes strove to penetrate the shadows of the surrounding trees, they failed to descry two fugitive figures, already far ahead, and running swiftly in the direction of the castle!

"Stop, Luita, stop!" cried Delius, when they had reached the open glade beyond the chestnut alley. "I dare not go farther. Why are you running away?"

"I must go, I must go!" she panted. "They will be waiting for me, and oh, I am not dressed!"

"Dressed!" exclaimed Delius, in surprise. "Why, you are dressed just like every day, are you not?"

"Yes, but not for a visit. We are expecting somebody—did I not tell you?—and that must be him, I fear."

"That? The gentleman who was so particular about making his toilet, and who frightened us so?"

"Yes, yes, that old gentleman. It must be he, our Italian cousin, whom we are expecting."

"Old?" said Delius doubtfully. "Was he old? I am not sure. And so he is a cousin?"

"Let me go," repeated Luitgard, disengaging her hand from his. "I shall be late; I dare not stay."

"But I have hardly seen you; you have told me nothing yet, Luita. When shall I see you again?"

"Next Sunday," said Luita, "if I can only manage to get away."

"You must manage," said Delius decidedly. "Very well, next Sunday let it be. Remember I shall wait for you here all the afternoon. I shall wait till midnight, for the moon will be up."

She was gone before he could make another attempt to detain her, and Delius stood still watching her disappear with an uneasy frown on his brow.

The marchese, meanwhile, had regained the travelling carriage. There was a flush on his high forehead, and his eye shone with an unusual light, observing which his servant asked—

"Has anything occurred to disturb the Signor Marchese?"

"Nothing," said the marquis hurriedly. "I—I had lost my handkerchief, and that would have been a pity, you know. There are not so many of them remaining now."

"It would have been a greater pity had it ever been found within these grounds," said the servant sententiously, glancing at the piece of cambric which his master still held between his fingers. "There are more holes in that handkerchief than could have been explained away by any amount of invention."

An hour later, Luitgard, attired in her new blue gown and with her hair correctly dressed and powdered, but with much inward trepidation, entered the large saloon where the family party was assembled. It was the first time since many years that Hedwig had left her sick-chamber upstairs, and in so doing she had desired to mark the whole solemnity of the present occasion, as of a rare and important family event to which special honours were due—a fact yet further emphasized by the unusual number of wax tapers burning in the crystal girandoles round the walls, and the lavish display of crimson damask furniture from which the habitual grey linen shrouds had been removed. Since Luitgard's earliest childhood she did not remember ever having seen the drawing-room furniture uncovered, and this circumstance alone was sufficient to make her feel awkward and embarrassed.

Hedwig cast a severe glance at her daughter, under which Luitgard flushed painfully and dropped her eyes.

"Our most noble cousin, the Marchese Frecciacorte," said the count, with an introductory gesture. "Marquis, this is my daughter Luitgard."

"I think I had the pleasure of meeting mademoiselle before, had I not?"—the marquis was beginning, when Luitgard, panic-struck at the threatened disclosure of her secret, raised her eyes to the visitor, and with a desperate effort stammered—

"Oh no, indeed; you cannot ever have seen me."

The marquis gazed again at his cousin very earnestly, conscious of a feeling akin to disappointment; but he had lived too long in a court atmosphere not to be quick to take a hint.

"Then I must have been mistaken," he said quietly. "It would be unpardonable, I am sure, to forget the face of Countess Luitgard after once having had the good fortune to behold it."

"It is not possible that you should have seen my daughter," remarked Othmar. "She has not yet been presented at court, and we go nowhere."

Luitgard, intensely relieved at seeing the threatened danger averted for the present, went to sit down beside Wulfhild on a distant sofa. Strange to say, the revulsion of relief had brought with it no feeling of gratitude towards the marchese for having so skilfully obeyed her wishes. A moment ago her eyes had been mutely imploring him not to betray her, but he had gained no advantage by his ready compliance, which was set down to courtier-like dissimulation.

"We lead the life of recluses," explained the countess, pursuing the theme. "As a wretched invalid, I am incapable of taking my place in society and introducing my daughter to the world."

The marchese had not taken his eyes off Luitgard since she entered the room.

"But surely you will not keep your daughter always shut up here?" he said, with unusual animation. "She will have to see the world—and the world will have to see her."

"Yes; I suppose someone else will show it to her some day."

"Her father, perhaps?" suggested the marchese, with a glance at Othmar.

"Or her husband," said Hedwig, in a lower tone, and bending a scrutinising glance upon him.

The marchese gave a violent start, as though he had received a sudden stab. There were in the room two keen pair of eyes which detected the momentary pallor overspreading his face.

When Hedwig found herself alone again in the privacy of her bedchamber, she leant back in her cushions with a deep-drawn sigh of relief. She was experiencing the sensation of someone who has been mustering his strength, stiffening his muscles, and holding in his breath, in order to lift a heavy weight, and who unexpectedly finds it to yield feather-light to the first touch of his hand.

"Is it possible?" she murmured. "Is it possible that

such incentives as poverty or ambition may be superfluous in this case? My own heart has been dead so long that I had well-nigh forgotten that such a thing as love still exists in the world—the rarest, but surely the strongest, of all levers?”

CHAPTER XIII

KONRAD'S HISTORY

LUITGARD and Wulfhild were sitting on one of the stone benches in the chestnut alley, about a week after the arrival of the Italian visitor. They had been engaged in desultory talk, and as usual the conversation was rather one-sided. It was Wulfhild who started every fresh topic, jumping from one subject to the other with her customary vivacity, while Luitgard gave somewhat languid answers, only occasionally roused to a quiet laugh by one of her companion's sallies.

"I wonder the noble marchese has not yet discovered our retreat," said Wulfhild presently.

"Why should he come?" asked Luitgard indifferently.

"Why should he come? Only because he is always coming. He seems to know by instinct where you are, and attaches himself to your footsteps like a well-bred greyhound."

"He has nothing better to do, I suppose," said Luitgard placidly. "The hunting will only begin next week, and he does not seem to care about music."

"Yet he sat close by the spinnet the whole time you sang Leonora's song yesterday," remarked Wulfhild.

"Oh yes, he cares for the family ballads, I suppose. But he got up and went away as soon as my father began to play his sonatas. Of course he likes ballads better."

"Perhaps," said Wulfhild doubtfully; then glanced at Luitgard with a little impatience, and seemed on the point of adding more, but checked the impulse as quickly. "She is

very slow to understand," she muttered to herself. "But what is the good of my telling her? She will find out for herself. And, after all, she cannot go on being a child for ever."

Luitgard was indeed very slow to perceive the deep, ineffaceable impression she had produced upon her stiff and formal-looking cousin; though, to say the truth, such grave, unobtrusive attentions might well fail to be read aright by a novice. He neither spoke much, nor tried to put himself forward, and if now and then he indulged in one of the long-winded, flowery compliments which savoured of the court, it was delivered in a stately, measured fashion, which seemed to preclude all suspicion of lover-like ardour. His bearing never relaxed from the dry crust of formality that seemed to encase his whole person as with a coat of mail, and he would assuredly have been greatly surprised if told that he had nevertheless betrayed himself to all but the person most concerned in the matter.

But so it was, nevertheless, and in a hundred little ways the feeling he believed to be so securely locked up within his heart found daily and hourly expression, unmistakable to any shrewd observer. One had only to note the way in which he would sit watching the door when Luitgard was absent from the room; or how, when her absence grew prolonged, he would rise to his feet and pace the floor in short, nervous strides; how, when engaged in conversation with someone else, he would stop short in his phrase, and lose the thread of the discourse, if she only spoke or moved; how he would devise deep and complicated stratagems in order to achieve the luxury of touching her glove or her fan; and how, as Wulfhild had remarked, he followed her about like a greyhound, seeming by instinct to divine her whereabouts.

But all these signs had passed unnoticed by Luitgard, whose thoughts were already far away when Wulfhild presently asked—

"How do you like him?"

"Who?" said Luitgard, with a start.

"The marchese, of course. Are we not talking of him?"

"I neither like nor dislike him," said Luitgard, with a little hesitation.

"Well, you had better make up your mind to like him," said Wulfhild, with some significance in her tone, which, however, was lost upon the other.

"Yes, I suppose I ought to like him, because he is my cousin, and a cousin is a sort of brother."

"I don't think this one is meant to be a sort of brother," retorted Wulfhild.

"Oh, of course he is far too old to be my brother really," said Luitgard innocently.

Wulfhild burst into one of her unrestrained laughs.

"What a baby you are, Luitgard, in spite of your grave demeanour and your reserved manners! Do you really imagine that—brothers are always young and handsome?"

"But I am young," returned Luitgard. "So of course if I had a brother he would need to be young also to be like me."

"Well, here he comes, at anyrate, this cousin who is not near young enough to be a—brother," exclaimed Wulfhild. "Did I not tell you that he would be sure to find us out?"

Far down the arcade formed by the overhanging branches of the great horse-chestnut trees the marchese was approaching, a stiff black silhouette sharply defined against the clear autumn sunshine.

"Does he not look as if he had swallowed his walking-cane?" went on Wulfhild mockingly. "That is not the sort of man I should choose—for a brother, if I had my choice."

"What sort would you choose?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Wulfhild, drawing a deep breath and clasping her hands together impulsively, "I would choose my—my brother to be young and beautiful, with eyes like black cherries, and movements as light and graceful as those of a young stag bounding through the forest glades; not stiff, like those of your cousin, who walks as though he were wound up by machinery. His smile would be like sunshine breaking through the clouds after a thunderstorm, and his voice—oh, his voice would be rich and musical, tender and vibrating as"—

Wulfhild broke off suddenly, checking the impetuous flow of speech with an effort. Her eyes were shining with a deep, passionate light, and her breath was coming short and quick. "Bah! what is the use, child, of talking to you of things you cannot possibly understand? You have never seen anyone like that. How should you?—shut up here in this gloomy castle in the company of your mouldering ancestors!"

The marchese being now close to the stone bench on which the two girls were sitting, Luitgard was not called upon to make any reply, but she smiled pensively as she thought to herself, "That is just like the portrait of Delius!"

The marchese had stopped before them with a ceremonious bow. Might he have the honour of seating himself by the side of his fair cousin, if his unworthy presence did not incommode her?

"You may, most noble marchese," said Wulfhild promptly, answering for Luitgard, and slightly caricaturing his formal tone of voice, while she moved aside to make room for him on the bench. "You may aspire to the proud position of a seat upon this decayed old stone, ambitiously designated as a bench; and as for incommoding us, why, I think we are pretty sure to be all three mighty uncomfortable as long as we sit here. I cannot think why Luitgard chose just this bench when there are plenty better ones in the park."

"I like this seat," said Luitgard, "because it was Leonora's favourite place. It goes by the name of 'Die Herzensbank' (the Hearts' Bench). You can still see the heart that was cut in the stone, with the initials L and W inside it."

"L and W?" said the marchese interrogatively.

"Leonora and Wilibald, of course," said Luitgard, with the increased animation always perceptible whenever she began to talk of the family history. "That was before he went to Palestine, for after that she always sat at the top of the tower up yonder to watch for his coming back," and Luitgard pointed upward to the tall grey tower whose castellated edge showed dark against the sunset sky.

"And was it from there that she fell down and was killed?"

Luitgard merely nodded in reply. The tragedy of Leonora was always such a real and vivid thing to her that she could never allude to it without emotion. "She must have been very brave. I wonder she had the courage to do it," she went on, after a moment of silence.

"Brave!" cried Wulfhild. "No, I call it cowardly. It is always cowardly to try and escape from life. It is like a soldier running away from a battle. She should have stayed; should have lived and have fought for her lover with the other woman. That is what I should have done. I would never give up my lover to another without a struggle!"

"But if he had forgotten you?"

"My love would have been strong enough to conquer back his; and if not, if anybody was to die, I would rather have killed her."

"Killed who?" asked Luitgard, wondering.

"Her—the Turkish young lady, or you, or anyone else who tried to rob me of my lover—if I had one," she finished in a lighter tone, as though anxious to belie the heat into which she had been betrayed.

Luitgard shuddered.

"Don't talk of such dreadful things, Wulfhild. I don't want to take anything away from you."

Wulfhild gave Luitgard one of her fierce kisses.

"No, I know you don't, you foolish child. And there is nothing here to be taken. I was only talking of improbable impossibilities. All I meant to say was that there would have been far more sense in the two women fighting out the matter between themselves than in the men setting to cut each other's throats."

"Where was it that the brothers fought?" now asked the marchese.

"Over yonder, inside the Herons' Tower," said Luitgard, flushing a little. "The bloodstain is still there on the boards," she finished very low.

"Then you have seen it?" exclaimed Wulfhild. "I thought you told me you had never been inside the tower?"

"Bitterbalg told me," said Luitgard evasively.

"The blood of your great-grandfather, shed by my grandfather," said Frecciacorte very gravely, looking into Luitgard's face. "But he was innocent of all intention of murder, and the thought of having taken his brother's life hung like a heavy cloud over him all his days."

"Do you remember him?" asked Luitgard breathlessly.

"I was about eight years old when he died. I remember him well as a tall, grave man with snow-white hair and beard, who never smiled. He had been strikingly handsome in his youth, it is said, when he first arrived in the country in the retinue of the Princess Hilda of Faxen-Blankenstein, the betrothed of the Duke of Pardenä."

"I think I have had enough of family history for one day," said Wulfhild suddenly. "If you are intending to go much more deeply into those ancestors of yours, I shall take a walk around meanwhile with the hounds. I always find the present so much more interesting than the past."

She arose abruptly, and calling on Waldmann and Nimrod to follow her, sauntered away down a side alley. When she had quite disappeared the marquis turned again to Luitgard, and said with ceremonious politeness—

"If my conversation be likewise irksome to you, fair cousin, I am ready to relieve you of my presence?"

"Oh no," said Luitgard simply. "I like to hear about my ancestors. Bitterbalg always tells me about them, but of course he could not tell me the rest of Konrad's life after he left Germany."

"I will tell it, if you will permit me," said the marchese.

And this is the substance of the tale related to Luitgard by her cousin, Gastone Frecciacorte.

THE STORY OF KONRAD VON PFEILHOFEN.

When Hilda, daughter of the Prince of Faxen-Blankenstein,¹

¹ Faxen-Blankenstein, no longer to be found to-day on the map of Germany, was a small principality lying south of the Grand Duchy of Buxenburgh-Donnerhausen.

was wedded by proxy to the Italian Crown Prince of Pardená, in the year 1659, she set forth on her bridal journey accompanied by a suitable retinue of ladies-in-waiting with noble knights to defend her. The journey was a long and weary one, and far from safe in those days, and they were already well advanced on their way towards the Italian frontier, when one night, overtaken by darkness, and being encamped on the borders of a sombre forest, they were attacked by a band of brigands. The gallant gentlemen composing the bodyguard of the princess had allowed themselves to be surprised on this occasion, having so far forgotten themselves as to partake over freely of the strong Italian wine in order to recruit their strength from the fatigues of the day, and were one and all plunged in a heavy slumber. Tardily aroused by the shrieks of the princess and her ladies, they drew their swords, but were soon overpowered by the more active brigands. All hope of rescue seemed gone, and with shuddering dismay the hapless princess foresaw the wretched fate in store for her. Already the robber chieftain had fixed his insolent gaze upon her, already his hateful arm attempted to encircle her waist.

"Holy Virgin!" she cried, in agony. "Save me! oh, save me!"

And lo! no sooner was the royal maiden's prayer uttered than succour arrived, as it seemed, straight from Heaven! Who was that knight that on his milk-white charger came bearing down through the moonlit forest glade, putting her enemies to flight? To the Princess Hilda he seemed as beautiful as a god, as radiant as a celestial spirit, and she deemed him to be no other than the holy St. Michael himself come to her rescue.

"Tell me thy name, my preserver?" she said tenderly, when she had recovered the first shock of alarm.

His brow clouded over as he replied—

"I cannot, lady. I am a wretched outcast, who must flee his country, for he has blood upon his hands."

"Tell me thy name?" insisted Hilda. "I have a right to know it."

"My name should be Cain," he replied more moodily still. "That is the only name that will fit me."

But the princess was not to be baffled in her curiosity, and making a sign to her attendants to withdraw out of earshot, she talked to the unknown knight long and earnestly.

No other ear heard what passed between them, neither did it transpire thereafter. The other knights standing at a distance saw only how, after what seemed to be a prolonged and stubborn resistance, the stranger, yielding apparently to persuasion, knelt on one knee and laid his sword at the feet of the princess. They saw, too, how she extended her hand for him to kiss, then beckoned them to approach.

"Gentlemen," she said, addressing her retinue, "I here present to you a comrade and brother-in-arms, the noble Knight Konrado di Frecciacorte. He has satisfied me fully as to his birth and lineage, and henceforth I appoint him to be my own special cavalier and attendant; and you, my lords," she added severely, "you may well learn from him a lesson as to how to defend a lady intrusted to your charge."

The knights hung their heads in shame, and though outwardly forced to submit to the will of their royal mistress, the honour accorded to the handsome stranger rankled sorely in their minds. The whole rest of the way the princess compelled the stranger knight to ride close beside her litter or her horse, bestowing on him many a tender glance and amorous sigh. There were not lacking evil tongues who averred that it would only have depended on him to change the course of the journey, in which case the Crown Prince of Pardena would have waited in vain for his bride. But the valiant fugitive was not to be roused from his gloom by any royal favours or amorous smiles, and fulfilled his trust like a true and faithful knight.

It was whispered that he himself was mourning for a lost or a hopeless love, a surmise which seemed to receive confirmation from the black knot which he wore on his arm.

The handsome silent knight, over whose past history there hung a cloud of impenetrable mystery, rose subsequently to

high distinction and favour at the court of Pardená. He married, at the age of forty, the daughter of a small country nobleman, and retired with his wife to her native vineyards and olive groves at the foot of the mountains; for he had never taken kindly to court life, and valued but lightly the honours that had been thrust upon him unasked and undesired. He was a good husband and father, but no one ever remembered having seen him smile.

"And why did Konrad your grandfather never attempt to renew intercourse with his relations?" asked Luitgard, when her cousin had ceased speaking.

"You forget that he believed Wilibald to be dead when he fled the country, in which case the family would have been extinct."

"Extinct!" said Luitgard. "That means that my father would never have been born, nor I either!"

"But luckily it was not so," said the marchese quickly.

Luitgard looked at him with surprise. The idea of her own birth being lucky was not familiar to her. Delius had already once surprised her by saying that he was glad the girl and not the boy had lived, and now her cousin was hinting something of the same sort. She was silent for some moments, pursuing a train of thought.

"And if Wilibald had really been killed by his brother," she said at last, "who would now have lived at Castle Pfeilhofen? To whom would it then have belonged?"

"Why, then, I suppose, my grandfather would have been the heir-at-law after Eberhard's death, now that I come to think of it," replied the marchese, with scarce perceptible hesitation—"unless, indeed, by his fratricide he had forfeited his right to succession. In any case, however, I am very sure that he would never have thought of claiming a fortune which had come to him in such a terrible manner. His whole life was devoured by remorse, though no one knew the exact history of his crime or misfortune. He fasted three times a week on bread and water, and wore sackcloth next his skin even

under his gaudy court dress ; and every year, on the anniversary of the day he believed to be that of his brother's death, he shut himself up alone, and would speak to no one. It was only upon his deathbed that he disclosed the truth to my father, and bade him have masses said for the souls of his cousin and brother."

"And your father—he told you the story?" suggested Luitgard.

"No, he never spoke of it, for he too was silent and reserved ; but after his death I found all the papers establishing these facts. We passed for an Italian family in the country, although it was vaguely understood that my grandfather had come from the North."

"And you were brought up at court?" pursued Luitgard.

"No, I did not go there till my fifteenth year, after my father's death ; for then it was found that the estate was deeply mortgaged and had to be sold, and so I was compelled to take service, in order to keep my mother from want. But for that, I would rather have worked like the meanest labourer on my own land. But it was a lucky chance, all the same, which led me back to the court of Pardena, where my grandfather had served," he added quickly, as though to undo the impression of his last words. "But for that I should never have come to Germany and met with relations who were not ashamed to acknowledge me as a kinsman."

"Why ashamed?" asked Luitgard, uncomprehending. "Kinsmen are surely always made welcome by their relations?"

"Not always, not when they are—poor, like myself."

He spoke with a slight effort, and his complexion grew a shade darker as he pronounced the words ; but he looked her straight in the face.

"Oh !" said Luitgard, more surprised than touched. "I thought that at court everybody was rich?"

A bitter smile came over his face, making it look older and more worn than before.

"Is that your idea of court life, my cousin? But to be sure, how should you know better?"

"Are you talking about the court?" now put in Wulfhild, who had come up behind the speakers. "Come, that is better than the ancestors, at all events. I also want to hear more about the court. It is the dream of my life to be able to go there, to be presented, and to create a great, great sensation, so that everyone on seeing me will stand still and ask, 'Who is she?' Not that I am likely ever to have the chance," she went on aggrievedly. "For who on earth is ever to take me there or pay for my gowns? You, Luitgard, are sure to see the world and to find plenty people who will ask, 'Who is she?' But my poor charms will be left to decay in fruitless solitude for lack of opportunity."

"But there is one opportunity within your reach, mademoiselle," said the marchese courteously.

"A wealthy marriage, you mean?" returned Wulfhild heedlessly. "Oh, of course that is the one stereotyped road supposed to be open to a penniless girl; just as the only thing a poor man can do is to marry an heiress. But at this moment I do not very well see where *my* rich man is to come from."

The marchese drew himself up with more than his usual stiffness, and rose to take leave of the ladies.

"You mistake me, mademoiselle. I was not talking or thinking of marriage. What I alluded to was the Chapitre Noble at Buxenburg for young girls of distinguished families, to which you might possibly obtain admittance if you were able to prove yourself of noble lineage and irreproachable antecedents."

Wulfhild burst into one of her noisiest laughs, perhaps to cover the slight discomfiture she may have felt at the deserved rebuke of her tactless speech.

"Irreproachable antecedents! That sounds rather dull, does it not? and I fancy would scarcely suit me. Twenty noble ladies of irreproachable antecedents all living in one house together, and without a man to bless themselves with! No, thank you! If ever I part with my liberty it will not be in exchange for that sort of thing!"

CHAPTER XIV

A STRUGGLE AND SURRENDER

LATE that same evening the Marchese Frecciacorte was pacing up and down the lofty apartment which had been assigned to him as bedroom, with nervous strides indicative of strong mental disturbance. Basilio, standing patiently near the bed, awaited his master's commands, having twice vainly inquired which suit he should prepare for the morning. When at last the marchese paused in his agitated walk, he took the opportunity to repeat his query a third time.

"It had better be the slate-coloured suit with the silver lace, I am thinking, padrone. The great thing is to change as often as possible, so as to prevent folk from getting over-acquainted with any one garment, and counting the stains or darns."

"There will be no call for further change at Castle Pfeilhofen," returned the master. "You may pack the travelling valise in the morning, for we leave to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" repeated the domestic, in a voice of discomfiture. "We are to leave to-morrow!"

"Yes, to-morrow. We have been here long enough—too long, I fear."

"But the noble padrone said that we should stay here a fortnight at least," suggested Basilio.

"I have changed my mind," replied his master curtly.

"And the grand hunting festivities which were fixed for next week in honour of your excellency?"

"Will have to take place without me."

"Then I have wasted my time these three mortal hours in

furbishing up the buttons of the hunting costume to make them look almost like new."

"Apparently," said the marchese, still shortly. Then he added, in another tone, "Why, what makes you so wonderfully anxious to stay here all of a sudden, Basilio? Did you not tell me yourself only yesterday that you are always quarrelling with that sour-faced old Bitterbalg?"

"Quite true, noble padrone. It is enough to make boiled macaroni turn sour on the stomach to hear the manner in which he is always vaunting the family of Pfeilhofen."

"And am I not a Pfeilhofen myself, Basilio?"

"That is just what I cannot bring him to comprehend, master. He says he has never yet heard of a Pfeilhofen who was not born inside these walls, and he is always talking of a Count Kunibert, who would have died of grief if he had lived to see this day."

"And what else, Basilio?" inquired the marchese, beginning to be vaguely amused at Basilio's chatter.

"Oh, it is always the same thing over and over again. Count Kunibert here and Count Kunibert there, till you cannot make out whether he is talking of a real live person, or only a make-believe of his own. Who is this Count Kunibert that seems so vastly important? There is no one of that name about the place. There is only Count Othmar, who is all day at his spinnet, and the sick lady countess."

"And their daughter," said the marchese, flushing a little.

"Old Bitterbalgo does not seem to think much of the daughter," returned Basilio. "He is always talking as if it were somehow her fault that Count Kunibert is not here. 'Then where is your wonderful Count Kunibert?' says I to him this very evening. 'Maybe he too is serving away like my master at one of the foreign courts.' And would you believe it, he answered me as bold as brass, 'Our noble Count Kunibert is at a better place than court;' and then he uncovered his head, just as we do in Italy when passing a crucifix."

"And he was right," returned the marchese gravely.

"And when I told him that your excellency was the Grandmaster Inspector of all the royal windmills," went on Basilio aggrievedly, "did he not answer me in these very words: 'Then I'll be thinking that he is something like our Gottschalk here, if he is paid to look after these turning things, just as Gottschalk has to keep an eye upon the running stags and the grunting wild boar. So a grandmaster inspector is nothing else with you but a kind of servant, after all. My master is the master of Pfeilhofen, and that is more than all your grandmasters, I reckon,' says he."

"Right again!" said the marchese, with a sigh; but Basilio, who had not yet come to an end of his grievances, presently resumed—

"The man must be clean crazy, I think, for I could not get him to realise the importance of your excellency's decorations, though I explained to him quite distinctly that the red cross with the blue stones was the badge of the Order of the Knights of Loretto, and that the big diamond star is the insignia of the high and mighty Order of the Pardena Violet. 'We have got diamonds too, only we don't wear them,' says old Bitterbalgo. 'There is the necklace and coronet of Countess Hedwig, which she wore on her marriage day, only she has never put them on again since the day when Count Kunibert left us. Those diamonds have been in the family these two hundred years and more, but I never yet heard of a Pfeilhofen getting diamonds as a present, or as wages. We always buy our family jewels ourselves.'"

"And what would old Bitterbalg say if he knew that more than half the stones in my diamond star have had to be replaced by paste long ago, to keep yourself and me from starving, my worthy Basilio?"

"Paste stones are every whit as good as diamonds—until they be found out," returned the servant, with an air of conviction. "They shine as brightly at night, and are quite as becoming to pretty women as real stones; while as to old women or ugly ones, they do not require real diamonds to show

off their defects. And of course I would sooner die than betray it to that old boaster, who turns my very blood to gall whenever he but opens his lips."

"Then what is it that makes you so mighty anxious to stay on here longer?"

"Why, only to show that old braggart that we are as good anyway as his famous Count Kunibert—and then"—

"And then—what?"

"Why, then I was only thinking that surely it would be a pity to go away just before these hunting festivities that everyone is talking about," returned Basilio, rather sheepishly.

"Why, worthy Basilio, it seems to me that you are beginning to find out that Castle Pfeilhofen is better than the court after all, despite your protestations."

"It is not that," said the servant eagerly. "How should I demean myself by such a thought? The court is the court to be sure, and this but a nobleman's castle. But I was merely wanting to see whether these hunting festivities be really as grand as they are saying. Depend upon it, it is just arrogant boasting. Why, old Bitterbalgo was saying to me this same evening that the venison slain here in one week would suffice to feed the whole Residenz during a month. The very servants here are to get venison pasty for their supper every evening—at least so says that old boaster. Not that I am fool enough to believe him, however."

But, despite his expressed disbelief, Basilio covertly licked his lips with an unconscious movement.

"So this is the real truth of the matter!" exclaimed the marchese, with a dry laugh. "It is your poor famished stomach that is crying out for the flesh-pots of Egypt in spite of all your magnificent philosophy! For you know full well that once back at Buxenburg we too shall have to return to our old meagre fare, save on the days when our service calls us to the palace."

Basilio hung his head guiltily, as though detected in some shameful action.

"It was only to give the lie to that arrogant old boaster," he

muttered. "And as to being hungry, why, it is only this beastly German climate which makes one so. In Italy, now, I can live quite comfortably for three days upon an orange and a cup of *café nero*; but here my inside always feels as empty as a church in carnival time. This climate cannot be wholesome if it forces people to eat so much. But I never really put faith in those venison suppers," he finished plaintively.

"Basilio," now said the marchese, sitting down in a large tapestried arm-chair, and speaking in a graver tone than what he had hitherto employed, "do you not know that for every nobleman there is one jewel that cannot be replaced by any paste imitation which ever was made—and that jewel is his honour? It is my honour which demands that I should not stay longer at Castle Pfeilhofen. And now leave me. I require rest, and you can pack to-morrow."

Basilio retired, well knowing from his master's expression that all further argument was useless. But though the marchese declared himself to be in want of rest, yet the sound of his restless footsteps over the polished oak floor might have been heard until far into the small hours of the night.

It was Wulfhild's heedless remark which had all of a sudden opened his eyes, and showed him whither he was drifting. "The only thing a poor man can do is to marry an heiress," she had said, as he sat by Luitgard's side beneath the golden horse-chestnut trees this afternoon; and with a throb of pain he was rudely recalled to the recollection that he was a poor man, and his cousin a wealthy heiress. Strange to say, he had not considered their respective positions in that light before. The effect produced by Luitgard's spiritual face and visionary style of loveliness had been so immediate and so overwhelming that he had never paused to ask himself what was her actual position in the world, and whether her fortune were not in itself an insurmountable barrier to his love? There was nothing indeed about Luitgard's attitude or position in the family to remind a stranger that she was a wealthy heiress,

representing in her unobtrusive person the last scion of an illustrious line. She was not petted and made much of as only daughters mostly are, and no one could be long at Castle Pfeilhofen without finding out that the little dead baby boy whose portrait hung upstairs in Countess Pfeilhofen's room was a far more important personage than the pale, fair-haired girl, whose voice was so rarely heard, and who flitted along the vaulted corridors with an air of almost ghostlike unreality, yet who nevertheless had now stirred a strong, manly heart as it never, had been stirred before.

Gastone Frecciacorte was a man whom Fate had treated with but scanty favour, and it was a long series of deceptions and disappointments which had stamped his face with the expression of one who had nothing more to expect of life. The family of Frecciacorte, naturalised in Italy in consequence of the events recorded in last chapter, had sunk into abject poverty after Everardo's death, so that his son Gastone, at the age of fifteen, had been forced to take service at court in order to keep himself and his mother from starvation. The name of Frecciacorte was still in good odour at the court of Pardenà, where his handsome, mysterious grandfather was not forgotten; so, although singularly disqualified by nature for the *role* of a courtier, Gastone had no choice but to accept the situation offered to him. Too stiff to acquire the supple graces of his trade, too proud to fawn or flatter as he saw others doing around him, too reserved to make capital out of his patriotism, he was daily passed over for men in every way his inferiors. More audacious men stepped into the places which should have been his by right; more cringing men stooped to pick up the riches that were lying under his very feet; more cunning and long-sighted men intercepted the favours which should have come in his way: the result being that, after over twenty years of court service, Gastone Frecciacorte was still, as he had said himself, a pauper nobleman, who often found it difficult to conceal from the world the make-

shifts whereto he was compelled in order to keep up appearances.

When the Princess Isabella, a great-granddaughter of that same Princess Hilda who had shown such favour to the fugitive Konrad, was betrothed to the Grand-Duke of Buxenburg-Donnerhausen, the Marchese Frecciacorte had been selected as a fitting person to conduct the princess to her new home in Germany. The mission was not an enviable one, and Gastone smiled bitterly to himself when informed that His Serene Highness, the Duke of Pardenà, had appointed him as guardian and ambassador to his dearly beloved daughter Isabella, well knowing in reality that the place was only given to him because no one else cared to have it. The reigning Grand-Duke of Buxenburg-Donnerhausen was popularly supposed to be mad, and strange stories were related of the goings-on at his court, which was consequently held in small repute among other contemporary princes. It was probably on this account that the Duke of Pardenà, when requested to furnish a bride for the little German State, had decided that his plainest daughter would be good enough for this northern applicant; and no doubt a similar train of thought had been at work when, in selecting a cavalier to attach to her person, he had fixed upon Marchese Frecciacorte.

"His ancestor came from the North," had said the Duke of Pardenà, when signing the royal decree containing Gastone's nomination to his new appointment. "Then to the North let him take his flight back—and I care not if he remains there altogether—this cold, proud fellow who looks as stiff and as hard as one of the arrows upon his own shield."

And the duke had laughed at his own mild little witticism; but he had scowled prodigiously on learning later of the affront put on his daughter by the insane Grand-Duke of Buxenburg-Donnerhausen. Someone must be made to suffer for this ignominy; and so the full weight of his ire fell upon the luckless ambassador who had, to his thinking, so greatly mismanaged affairs. This is how Gastone

Frecciacorte had suddenly found himself transplanted to the little German court, where, within a very few weeks of his arrival, he had been sought out by Othmar Pfeilhofen, and greeted as a kinsman. It is very certain that unless the first advances had come from the Pfeilhofen side, and in such pressing form as to brook no refusal, he himself would have put forward no claim to their notice.

Such had been his attitude before he had seen Castle Pfeilhofen and its inhabitants; but from the day of his arrival his whole nature had undergone one of those abrupt revulsions which sometimes overthrow the cold philosophy of years, as a torrent of boiling lava sweeps away the smooth vegetation of many summers' growth. Among the bitter lessons which poverty had taught him, was the dreary truism, that love is not for a poor man, being just one of those luxuries which he must learn to do without. The first woman he had ever loved, some fifteen or sixteen years ago, had trifled with his heart, only to cast it lightly aside to wed a wealthy rival; and since that day Gastone Frecciacorte had lost his faith in women—at least so he had told himself—until that other day on which he had first set eyes on his Cousin Luitgard.

This week had passed for him in a kind of trance, and now only did he begin to ask himself, with a despairing attempt at regaining his wonted lucidity of judgment, whereto all this was leading. What was the good of giving way to a passion which could have no other result but that of leaving his life yet more desolate than it already was? Luitgard was separated from him through the triple barrier of her youth, her beauty, and her wealth. Who was he, the man of thirty-six, who felt far older than his age, to seek to mate with this frail and exquisite flower? He had nothing of his own to offer her—neither youth, nor wealth, nor personal attractions; nothing but his own stainless name, and the same blue blood that flowed in her own veins.

That he must leave Castle Pfeilhofen, and that without delay, was the inevitable conclusion which terminated the

mental struggle. He must retire now at once, while he still could do so with honour, while no one guessed his secret as yet—at least, so he deemed, with that transparent simplicity so often characteristic of strong, manly love.

Next morning at breakfast the announcement of the marchese's intended departure was received by Othmar with blank consternation, by Wulfhild with saucy disbelief, and with placid indifference by Luitgard. As soon as the meal was over Othmar hurried to his wife's apartment, to pour forth the distressing intelligence.

"And just as we fancied all was going on so smoothly!" he exclaimed, throwing himself into an arm-chair and fanning his forehead nervously with his handkerchief. "Nothing that I could say would induce him to change his mind, or to fix a date for returning. There is an end of our plans and of our hopes! Oh, Hedwig, I feel like a thief whenever I sit opposite to him and look at his threadbare coat and the holes in his lace ruffles which he tries to keep out of sight. Fifty times already I have been on the point of confessing the truth to him."

"Then fifty times you have been on the point of making a fool of yourself," said Hedwig irritably; but Othmar went on—

"How can I let him leave my house—his own house—to return to a life of poverty and privation, without undeceiving him? Oh, Hedwig, it is more than I can bear to keep up this farce. I did not think it would be so hard!"

Countess Pfeilhofen looked at her husband superciliously.

"He will not leave the house."

"But I tell you that his travelling valise is already packed, and the carriage will be ready in an hour."

"The valise can be unpacked and the carriage countermanded."

"I have tried every form of persuasion, exhausted every argument," went on Othmar despondently. "What can be his

motive? It utterly escapes me. We must have offended him in some way or other without our knowledge. I cannot make him out at all with his stiff and starched set of manners."

"Perhaps I can make him out better," returned Hedwig. "Say nothing more about asking him to stay, but merely tell him that I request the favour of his presence in order to bid him farewell."

When the Marchese Frecciacorte was shown into the room where Countess Pfeilhofen passed her lifetime, he felt almost as though he were entering a chamber of death. Towards evening, when the invalid was sitting up in a cushioned arm-chair, animated by a fictitious gaiety, the ravages of disease were scarcely perceptible; but in the crude light of an autumnal day, extended motionless on the couch in her white morning wrapper, she might almost have passed for a figure laid out for burial, but for the restless eyes ever flitting to and fro, and whose vigilance nothing escaped.

"Not there, marchese, I pray," she said gently, as he was about to seat himself with his back to the light. "Sit here where I can see you better," and she motioned to a chair at the other side of the couch.

"I have come to take leave of my noble kinswoman, and to thank her for the gracious hospitality I have enjoyed. Affairs of importance summon me back to the Residenz," began Frecciacorte, in a formal tone. But Hedwig seemed hardly to have heard him, and did not make any immediate reply. She had raised herself up on her elbow, and was scrutinising his features with a piercing attention, as though she would read some mysterious cyphers there impressed.

"Why are you going?" she said at last.

"Affairs of importance summon me back to the Residenz," said the marchese, repeating his previous formula; but Hedwig made a quick motion of the hand, as though putting aside this stereotyped excuse as something utterly beneath her notice.

"Why are you going?" was all she said; and her look was so direct and so searching that the marchese turned his eyes away, instinctively fearing that his secret must be mirrored there. His gaze now fell on the portrait of the little dead boy which hung straight opposite. At that moment the thought struck him that if that boy had lived, then Luitgard would not have been the wealthy heiress she now was. She might then, perhaps, have been less utterly out of his reach, for at least there would have been one barrier the less between them. It was almost with some feeling of resentment that he now looked at the portrait of the dead baby, as though it had done him a wilful injury in refusing to live.

"You are looking at the portrait of my son," said Hedwig, who had followed his glance. "The last Pfeilhofen of Pfeilhofen. Read the date upon the scroll below the picture."

A ray of pale sunshine, entering stealthily through the grated window, illumined the bottom of the painting, so that the marchese could easily read from where he sat—

"Kunibert, Count Pfeilhofen: born 10th April 1721; died 10th April 1721."

"That is seventeen years ago," said Hedwig slowly. "And for seventeen whole years, since the hour when my boy was laid in his coffin, I have mourned for him in a double sense—as a mother, and as a Pfeilhofen."

She paused for a moment and pressed her clasped hands tight against her side, as though to keep back the old pain from rising to the surface; then she went on—

"For the mother's loss there is no compensation here on earth, but the family loss may yet be retrieved. The day when I heard your name, and learned that you were the grandson of Konrad von Pfeilhofen, the first ray of hope came back into my life since seventeen long years. Why are you going away?"

"Because I cannot stay," said the marchese, feeling that his carefully prepared excuses would not serve him here.

"Have we not made you welcome here, as a kinsman and son of the house?"

"You have—you have; and I am grateful for it. Nevertheless, I must go."

"Has any of our retainers been wanting in fitting respect towards your person?"

"No one. Yet I must go."

"Are you leaving this house because you dislike any one of its inmates?" asked Hedwig, affecting a lighter tone. "Perhaps you have taken an aversion to myself or my husband?"

"How could I?" exclaimed the marchese heartily, and thrown off his guard for the moment. "You have indeed been the kindest of kinsfolk to me, to whom family life has long been unknown."

"Then," said Hedwig quickly, "it can only be your Cousin Luitgard that you wish to avoid?"

With that perfidious strategy of which women alone possess the secret, Hedwig had led up to this point; and then, seeing her victim helpless before her, lightning-like she had planted her weapon in his wound. Placed full in the treacherous light which streamed in from the window, Gastone Frecciacorte had not a chance of disguising his emotion from those piercing eyes, which searched him through and through. Every trace of colour receded from his face, and his breath came short and fast like that of a man in deadly agony. He put up his handkerchief to his forehead to wipe away the cold drops which were starting there.

Hedwig looked on with cool triumph, betraying no trace of pity for the suffering she saw. When she had gazed long enough she resumed—

"There are only two reasons for desiring to avoid a person,—hate or love. Which of the two is it with you, marchese?"

"In pity do not ask!" now broke from his lips. But the merciless countess continued—

"I do not require to ask, for I know already. You are leaving Castle Pfeilhofen because you love my daughter."

"Why do you torment me thus?" cried the marchese

almost fiercely, as he rose to his feet. "Let me go in peace. You see yourself that I cannot remain."

"Not if I ask you to stay? Not if I, Luitgard's mother, beg of you to do so?"

"Do you know what you are saying, Countess Hedwig?" he said low and hurriedly. "Is it right, is it generous to tempt an unfortunate man thus?"

"I know what I am saying right well, my cousin, and it is precisely because you love my daughter that I ask you not to go."

Gastone put up his hand over his eyes as though suddenly blinded by an excess of light. When he spoke again it was in his usual tone of measured constraint.

"Have you forgotten my poverty, Countess Hedwig? Do you remember that I can bring nothing of my own to my wife?"

Hedwig winced, and flushed ever so slightly.

"You can give her what no other man on earth can give—the name of her ancestors. You are a Pfeilhofen, and the blood in your veins is as good as hers. What matters it on which side be the fortune, since it all comes from a common source?"

"That is not my opinion, craving your pardon, noble cousin; and until now I have never even admitted the possibility of enriching myself by marriage. A man should be the donor, not the recipient."

"Then supposing the cases to be reversed," said Hedwig, with an irresistible impulse to tread upon dangerous ground. "If you instead of my husband were the legal owner of Castle Pfeilhofen and all its broad lands, and my daughter were a dowerless maiden?"

"Ah, then I should be free to lay my fortune at her feet, for it would be worthless without her."

"There is such a thing as misplaced pride, my cousin," said Hedwig, with some slight irritation, "and I fail to see the sense of a man who refuses to marry a woman he loves merely because she happens to have a fortune."

"Perhaps you are right, I hardly know, for my judgment is so upset just now that I cannot trust myself to see anything clearly. Do you therefore really wish me to understand, Countess Hedwig, that I have your permission—your authorisation—to pay my addresses to my Cousin Luitgard? To try my chance with her, however slight that may be?"

"What do you mean by trying your chance? I shall simply send for my daughter, and tell her that you are the husband we have chosen for her."

"But will she consent? I scarcely can dare to hope so. Remember the difference in our ages—seventeen and thirty-six!"

"Luitgard has been brought up to obey her parents. She has never seen the world, nor set eyes on another man in our station of life. As a matter of course, she will consent to whatever her father and I have settled."

The Marchese Frecciacorte murmured some incoherent words of agitated thanks as he bent down to kiss the wasted hand held out to him at the close of this interview, but Hedwig interrupted him almost fiercely.

"Do not thank me; you have nothing to thank me for." Then, seeing his look of surprise, she checked herself and finished in a calmer tone, "There cannot be any question of thanks between us, surely, for you give at least as much as you take. By becoming our son-in-law you save the family from extinction. Without you, the Pfeilhofens of Castle Pfeilhofen would cease to be!"

CHAPTER XV

THE RUBY RING

AN hour later, Luitgard came out of her mother's room looking rather pale, but with an expression rather of bewilderment than of grief upon her face.

She closed the door softly behind her, and walked to the first window of the long vaulted passage which ran along this side of the house. She pushed open both wings of the casement as though in want of air, and then stood there, leaning her head against her two clasped hands, plunged in deep and perplexing thought.

Married! She was to be married, her mother had said, and to her cousin, the Marchese Frecciacorte, who would resume the German name of Pfeilhofen. She had always vaguely taken for granted that she would be married some day, without, however, having formed any definite idea as to the person of her future husband or the changes which such an event implied. Nearly all the damsels of the house of Pfeilhofen (excepting the luckless Leonora, and a comparatively small number who had died in very early youth) had been wedded in their turn to various noble counts or barons, whose names were all duly entered in the family chronicles; but the idea of matrimony was an abstract one as yet, connected in Luitgard's mind rather with dingy paintings and dry, crackly parchment sheets, than with warm flesh and blood. A marriage union, as she comprehended it, was rather the unison of two escutcheons than one of hearts. She was familiar with the heraldic system, according to which a wife's arms are marshalled along with those of her husband, having seen the Pfeilhofen arrows

depicted in various combinations along with other noble emblems. Perhaps what surprised her most about the whole matter, was the discovery that she was already old enough to be married, matrimony having always appeared to her in the light of a somewhat middle-aged proceeding. Hitherto, if she had thought at all about matrimony, it had been as of something still far away on the horizon, with a whole revolving series of other pictures—spring flowers, autumn leaves, and winter snows—in the foreground; with these, and yet something else, which she was vaguely conscious of expecting, without being able to define.

And now, all at once to be told, without preparation, that in a few short weeks, before the leaves would quite have finished dropping from the old horse-chestnut trees, and almost before the first snow would have fallen on the forest, this distant and shadowy event was to become a reality!

As to the person of the bridegroom-elect, strange to say he occupied very little of her thoughts at the present moment. She was not conscious of experiencing either like or dislike for his person. Besides, even had he been as old as Methuselah and as ugly as Vulcan, the possibility of refusing to marry him would never have occurred to her, once her mother's desires had been clearly expressed.

Her father's voice close alongside roused Luitgard from her meditations.

"Luitgard, my child! Your mother has spoken to you?" he said eagerly.

"Yes, father."

"And you will marry your cousin? You will make us all happy? Thank you! Thank you, my own daughter!" he exclaimed, embracing her effusively. "You have made me feel twenty years younger—you relieve my mind of an unspeakable burden," and he kissed her again.

"Why?" asked Luitgard, surprised at this extraordinary elation.

"Because—because," said Othmar, recollecting himself, "because, of course, every girl must marry, and it will be a

comfort to myself and to your mother to know you happily settled—and with one of your own name, too. What could be better? Pfeilhofen will now belong to you—to you and to your husband. I have quite made up my mind about that. Now go to the big saloon; the marchese is there waiting for you.”

Luitgard shivered a little as she turned away from the open window, but her step betrayed no hesitation as she walked down the long passage and opened the door at the farther end.

The marchese, standing with his back to the door, turned round quickly at her entrance and came to meet her. Making a low and stately bow, he was about to speak, when she forestalled him by saying, calmly and simply—

“My mother has told me that you desire to marry me.”

“It has become the dearest wish of my life, ever since the first moment when I beheld you, my fair cousin,” returned Gastone, laying his hand on his heart in true courtier style. “It is in your power to make me supremely happy. Do you consent to do so?”

Luitgard, rather bewildered, stared at her suitor, neither comprehending how it was that she had the power to make so many people happy, nor wherefore such a very superfluous thing as her consent was being asked.

Seeing that she did not answer, Gastone said again, very gently—

“Will you indeed consent to become my wife? Will you intrust your hand to me?”

Luitgard stretched out her cold little hand. The marchese held it for a moment in his, looking down upon it as upon something infinitely precious and sacred, then raising it ceremoniously to his lips, he said—

“I shall guard it as a priceless gift. Henceforth it will be the only object of my life, to deserve the happiness I have obtained.”

His next movement was to detach from his watch chain an antique ruby ring which had belonged to his mother, and place it on her finger.

"May I go now?" asked Luitgard, when at last her hand was released.

He bowed silently, but Luitgard, as she turned to go, did not hear the half-suppressed sigh, nor note the wistful, yearning glance which followed her to the door.

The rest of that day seemed well-nigh interminable to Luitgard, and not until ten o'clock had struck, and all the family had retired for the night, was she able at last to steal away unobserved to the Herons' Tower, as she had been longing to do for hours past. Luitgard had never been outside the castle at so late an hour, yet, despite her natural timidity, there was no sense of fear about her now, as, wrapping herself up in a long loose cloak, she stole down the winding stairs, and opened the little door leading on to the terrace moat. She saw no reason to shrink from a nightly walk, any more than from one of her daily wanderings. The only sort of fear whereof she felt conscious was the fear of being seen from one of the windows as she traversed the open space before the castle, nor did she feel secure until, reaching the first horse-chestnut tree, she was followed up by protecting-shadows.

It was one of those rare moonlight nights, never more perfect than in early autumn, when the atmosphere, having shaken off the summer murkiness, is as yet untainted by the disfiguring mists of approaching winter. The Herons' Tower slept in the moonlight like a gigantic white coffin pointing heavenwards, and all around the dark pine stems kept guard like a row of defending sentries.

Delius, his back turned towards her, was standing on the steps leading up to the tower as Luitgard approached, and he appeared to be engaged in some very engrossing occupation whose nature could not at once be distinguished. Luitgard's light footsteps were unheard even by his sharp ear, and as she approached on tiptoe she could see that he held some sharp instrument in his hand, for the moonlight struck upon a bright glittering surface as of polished steel, drawing from it a profusion of silver sparkles. It was a large clasp-knife with

which he was stripping away the long trails of dense ivy in whose embraces the Goddess of Spring was stifled.

The sculptor who, perchance a hundred years ago, had bestowed upon a block of cold grey stone, the outlines of ripe and voluptuous female beauty, had evidently been of opinion that beauty unadorned is adorned the most, and had consequently grudged the outlay of superfluous drapery upon those faultless limbs which had grown beneath his chisel. Nature, however, had thought differently, or else the damsel's own sense of modesty had prompted her to draw tight around her figure that shrouding mantle of rich green ivy that grew with every succeeding year denser and more ample, till at last it had effectually screened her charms from the gravely disapproving gaze of the watchful grey herons overhead.

It was upon this luxuriant growth of ivy that Delius was now at work. Two or three long trails lay crushed and bruised upon the steps alongside, and now he was engaged upon the thick woody stem which crossed the nymph's once snowy breast.

"There, my beauty! You can breathe more freely!" he cried aloud in triumph a minute later, casting from him the heavy branch, which, falling into the pond with a dull splash, sent up a shower of diamond drops into the air.

The close-grown ivy network still clung about the nether part of the statue; one white foot alone peeped out from beneath its dark green skirt; but arms and bust were now free, and shining out in the moonlight in all their native grace, showed lines and inflexions which betrayed the hand of no mean artist. The small Greek head was poised on the faultless throat with consummate grace; the upraised arms, supporting a flower garland, had an expressive vitality rarely to be seen in stone; the delicately carved bosom was alluring and suggestive as that of a living woman.

Delius catalogued these charms with the eye of a connoisseur, and then, with a sudden impulse, he put an arm round her marble waist and pressed a kiss upon those cold but perfect lips.

Luitgard, standing close behind him still unperceived, was conscious of a strange sensation, an unwonted feeling of oppression never previously experienced. She had never seen anyone kissed before in that fashion; did men ever embrace living women like that? And all at once she became aware of a confused sense of injury, and of a strong feeling of dislike for that shameless stone woman, standing there so unblushingly in the full moonlight, with a man's arm round her waist.

"Delius, what are you doing? Why do you do that?" she said, laying her hand on his arm.

He turned round with a start, his face still glowing with an emotion of some kind.

"Because she is beautiful," he answered quickly.

"But she is only stone."

"Yes, she is only stone," repeated Delius more slowly, and with an intense look at Luitgard, under which, for the first time, she drooped her eyes. "Only stone, more's the pity, but for the moment I forgot that she was not alive. It is your own fault, Luita, if I am forced to beguile my time as best I can. Why do you leave me to the companionship of these cold statues? But you are as cold as the statues themselves," he continued, taking her hand. "Let us go inside. It is damp out here; see, the dew is beginning to fall," and he pointed to the glistening drops which like diamond ornaments hung about the neck and bosom of Luitgard's stony rival.

Together they entered the tower, and sat down upon the low-cushioned sofa that went by the name of Zelmira's seat.

The moonbeams, pouring in through the closely grated windows, were weaving strange, fantastic effects in the low irregular room, drawing tessellated designs upon the ground, and darting silver arrows into unexpected corners. They struck weird reflections from the tall Venetian glasses on the tables, and turned the dark bloodstain on the oaken boards into a pool of silver light.

"I could not come before," said Luitgard, in answer to his reiterated question. "Not a single moment have I been

alone since morning ; and oh, Delius, it has been such a long, long, weary day ! ”

Delius still held Luitgard's hand between his own. His fingers, closing round hers, came in contact with the ruby ring placed there by her cousin.

“What have you got on your finger ? ” he asked, feeling it more attentively, for just here it was too dark to distinguish details. “You never used to wear rings before.”

“It is my cousin, the Marchese Frecciacorte, who placed it there,” returned Luitgard, still listlessly. “My mother told me this morning that I am to be married to him.”

But Delius had sprung to his feet with a bound like that of a young panther.

“Married ! married ! ” he exclaimed, in accents of trembling passion. “You dare tell me that ! You are going to be married to another man ? You can dare to be so false, so treacherous, so deceitful ! ”

“I did not know it myself till this morning,” said Luitgard, beginning to tremble at his vehemence. “Indeed I knew nothing of it, or I should have told you.”

“You did not know that this man, this cousin as you call him, was coming here on purpose to make you his wife ? ”

“Oh no, I never guessed, never even suspected it,” faltered Luitgard.

“Will you swear to me that you are speaking the truth ? ” cried Delius fiercely, seizing both her hands and dragging her forward to the open door of the tower on to the steps, where the moonlight, streaming down bright as day, illumined her pale, scared face and dilated blue eyes.

“I will swear if you wish it, but indeed I am telling the truth. Why should I wish to tell you a lie ? I have never done so before.”

Delius could not fail to read her face aright ; she was at least innocent of attempting to deceive him ; so, mastering his passion with a supreme effort, he pursued his questions with somewhat less violence.

"And you have consented? You have said that you will take this man for your husband?"

Luitgard stared a little before she answered.

"Of course; if my mother has ordered me, I must marry him."

"And you mean to obey your mother?"

Luitgard was almost too much surprised to answer.

"What else can I do?" she asked in bewilderment. "But why are you so angry with me, Delius? And why do you hold my wrists so tight? You are hurting me."

Delius let go her wrists, but only to fling himself impulsively at her feet, his two arms clasping her waist in an impassioned embrace.

"Do you not understand me, Luita?" he panted, in a flow of tremulous eloquence. "Do you not understand that I alone can be your friend, your lover, your husband? Do you not see that it is impossible to suffer any other man to step between us? That man in the stiff laced coat and the powdered wig, whose heart is as cold as the stone he placed on your finger, can never be your husband. How could you imagine that a mere little chip of lifeless stone should prove a barrier between our warm, living, throbbing hearts? That stone and the promise you have given to him are but a pitiful comedy. This alone is real, this alone is life and love! Oh, Luita, Luita, my love, my sweetheart, do you not understand at last? Do you not feel that you are mine, and mine only, with every breath of your body, with every pulsation of your heart?"

His upturned eyes, flashing in the moonlight, seemed to beseech and command all at once; his arms were locked around her unresisting frame as tightly as though they would never loose their clasp again.

Did she understand?

Oh yes, she understood it now at last, as she trembled and quivered in the moonlight. Terrified and ravished at the passion she read in his eye, swept off her feet as it were by the impetuous torrent of his eloquence, she understood it now,

and many other things which had been dark to her before. Like a flower suddenly forced into bloom by the kiss of the burning sun, she saw the world with other eyes, and wondered at herself for having been so blind before. It was as if an unknown language had been spoken around her to which she had now suddenly got the key. Yes, Delius was right. This alone was life: to be standing thus here in the brilliant moonlight with a young, impassioned lover kneeling at her feet and gazing up into her eyes, as surely he had never gazed before at any woman of stone or of flesh! This alone was real, and by comparison the formal words and starched gestures of her bridegroom of this morning, seemed but a vague and shadowy dream.

With a sudden movement she wrenched the ruby ring from her finger and flung it from her. The ring bounded down the stone steps with a sharp metallic sound, like the staccato passage in an operatic melody, then rolled to the edge of the pond, as though intending to fall in but arrested there at the very brink by a stray pebble.

"Delius," said Luitgard, half an hour later, "what am I to do if my parents or the marchese notice that I am not wearing the ring?"

They were sitting in the room by this time, Luitgard somewhat exhausted by the hurricane of passion which had shaken her nature to its very foundations. The moon was now hidden behind a cloud, and the outlines of trees and statues outside had grown dim and hazy.

"You must say that you have lost it," said Delius quickly.

"I could not say that. I have never said anything untrue before, and I would be sure to blunder."

"Well, no; perhaps it would not do," said Delius reflectively. "It might not be prudent, as giving rise to the questions how and where you had lost it."

"That is not what I meant," began Luitgard; but he continued as though he had not heard—

"You must put on the ring again, that is all."

"Put on the ring!" exclaimed Luitgard, aghast. "How can I put it on again?" And indeed to her mind it seemed impossible to endure the thought of touching, far less wearing, that ring, which was the sign of an odious and impossible alliance. In that moment of enthusiasm, when, fired by the spark of passion caught from her lover, she had flung away the ring, she had felt as though this action had set her free. And now it was Delius himself who could talk so calmly of her putting on the ring again!

"Yes, you must put it on, and continue to wear it for a short time, till you have found a fitting occasion of breaking your engagement," said Delius, speaking with greater decision, "until we have made our plans for the future. But for the moment, prudence is the great thing to observe, and we must avoid anything which might direct suspicion towards me."

He rose to his feet, and, going down the steps, began to search for the fallen ring. A few minutes later he returned with it in his hand. Luitgard made no resistance as he placed it again on the third finger of her right hand, albeit conscious of a strange feeling of oppression, as though she were a captive being loaded again with chains. While he was thus engaged, he felt her give a sudden, violent start.

"What was that?" she said quickly, below her breath.

"What was what?" he inquired, in some surprise.

"There, there," and she pointed towards the bookcase nearest them. "Just there, near the place where those large green folios lie piled up. I am convinced I saw it. Two fiery eyes watching us."

"Impossible!" said Delius, letting go her hand and walking up to the place indicated. It was too dark to distinguish details, but he knew the position of the books accurately from having spent so many hours here by daylight. "Nobody could have been watching us. It must have been your fancy."

"It was not fancy," repeated Luitgard. "But the eyes I saw were small and bright, too small to belong to a person."

"Perhaps a rat or a weasel," suggested Delius, with light

mockery. "Surely you are not going to let yourself be scared by a rat? But I shall examine the book-shelves by daylight, and try to discover your mysterious enemy."

But Luitgard had risen to her feet, seized by a sudden, nameless terror.

"I must go now," she said. "It is so dark, and the trees look so strange and threatening now that the moon has gone down."

And as she regained the castle over the damp, dewy grass it seemed to Luitgard that she had lived through a whole lifetime within this last hour. Even that triumphant burst of passion, which had transformed her for a moment in the moonlight, now appeared unaccountably far away by retrospection.

CHAPTER XVI

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

THE next few days came and went, filling Luitgard with a sense of strange unreality. Preparations for the marriage were being hurried forward on all sides with a joyful alacrity, just as though this wedding was to be a real, *bona fide* fact. And throughout all this bustle, these noisy preparations, she alone, the pale, passive bride, knew that all this meant nothing, that this marriage could not, should not ever take place; and that the tall, silent man in the faded coat, could as little become her husband, as that stone woman yonder could step down from her pedestal and walk to the altar with Delius. And yet, knowing the impossibility of the event which was on everybody's lips, Luitgard had to go on pretending to believe in the farce acted around her; had to accept congratulations, listen to plans for the coming winter, try on gowns intended to be worn by a certain fabulous Marchesa Frecciacorte, who would never really exist; and, above all, go on wearing that hateful ruby ring, which even during sleep she seemed to feel heavy as lead upon her hand.

Luitgard had come to no definite conclusion as to the manner in which this hateful engagement was to be broken off. To appeal to her mother, and tell her how wretched the prospect of this union was making her, was clearly impossible; and as to her father—well, Luitgard simply shook her head despondently and sighed whenever she thought of her father. But within the last two days a sudden ray of comfort had come to her, in the shape of a letter announcing that old Countess Lilienfeld, Othmar's mother, intended to pay her

long-deferred visit to Castle Pfeilhofen. She had just recovered from a severe attack of fever, and, despite the advanced season of the year, the doctors had strenuously ordered change of air. To Luitgard this news seemed like a promise of release sent straight from Heaven. She had always as a child loved her good-natured, frivolous old grandmother, and felt more at ease with her than with either of her parents. It would not be difficult, she thought, to make of her an ally, and induce her to plead her cause.

There was another arrival expected at Castle Pfeilhofen besides that of the dowager countess, namely, an envoy from the Herald's Office at Buxenburg, to which Othmar had applied for someone capable of superintending the execution of an improved and complete family tree, incorporating all descendants of the fugitive Konrad down to his grandson, the present Marchese Frecciacorte. Ever since Luitgard's betrothal, Othmar had shown himself feverishly anxious to give as much publicity as possible to that event, seeking, as it were, to emphasize and accentuate by every imaginable device the fact of Gastone Frecciacorte's relationship to themselves, and of his approaching nuptials with their only daughter, the heiress of Castle Pfeilhofen. It would almost seem as though, in some dim, unrealised fashion, Othmar was endeavouring to hoodwink his conscience into the belief that he was acting squarely by his kinsman. All this noise and publicity expended upon the minor details of the situation, might they not in some way serve to condone that great and guilty secret that now could never be revealed?

It had therefore been decided that not only the large genealogical tree on the ceiling in the dining-hall was to be painted anew, but that likewise all the chronicles of the Pfeilhofen family were to be collected and copied out upon fresh parchment; and for this task someone well acquainted with Latin, as well as with the old German language of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, would be required, as many of the old manuscripts were faded and almost illegible. It was

therefore with high satisfaction that Othmar received a letter from the Herald's Office at Buxenburg containing the following passage :—

“Herr Dorndreher, whom we are sending in compliance with the desire of the noble Count Pfeilhofen, is our greatest living authority on the subject of heraldry and antiquarian research, and you may have fullest confidence in intrusting to him any task of this nature. No other can as unerringly decipher the meaning of an obscure badge, or an obliterated motto, or detect the smallest error, with regard to intricate points of marshalling, or differencing of a coat of arms.”

It was on the morning of the day fixed for the arrival of old Countess Lilienfeld, that Wulfhild, strolling alone in the park, had an unexpected meeting.

Unaccountable as she was in all her movements, she had risen at sunrise, and had ever since been scouring the park with a large staghound at her heels. Such fits of restlessness would often come over the girl, causing her sometimes to rush out into the open air whatever might be the weather. She seemed, in fact, rather to revel in the sensation of wind or rain, or in the tumult of a thunderstorm ; and this morning, having awakened from an uneasy dream with flushed cheeks and throbbing heart, her first impulse had been to get outside the house and cool her excitement in the small, soft rain which had been falling since early dawn.

The better to enjoy this congenial shower bath, Wulfhild had taken off her hat, which hung by a ribbon to her waist, and with head thrown back was inhaling in deep, long draughts the fresh morning air, beneath whose influence, her ever brilliant colour had but gained in brilliancy. Her thick black hair, hanging in two plaits down her back, appeared blacker than ever from the moisture it had absorbed ; a profusion of tiny raindrops, softer than diamonds, brighter than pearls, clustered about her forehead, and hung upon her dark-fringed eyelashes—or perhaps they were not all raindrops.

The large staghound, trotting behind her in dejected

fashion, seemed to regard this morning walk in the light of a painful duty, which the laws of politeness alone prevented him from shirking, not at all comprehending how anyone could be foolish enough to leave their warm kennel in order to wander about in the cheerless rain, without even the hope of a stag or boar to keep up their spirits. Too much depressed even to lift up his tail, it was rapidly becoming moist and draggled from contact with the long soaked grass, which Wulfhild always selected by preference to the gravelled alleys, and the dog's eyes were tightly closed with an air of painful resignation, as, guided by sound and scent alone, he followed his wayward and capricious companion. In this way they had reached the farther end of the park, seldom visited by any member of the household. Here the paths were allowed to grow wild, and the trees had an air of more reckless expansiveness than at other parts nearer the castle. One large beech tree in particular, growing up against the high park wall, let its branches hang down heavily to the turf at its feet, while stretching forth an upper limb above the wall, as though to shake hands with an ancient fir tree growing on the other side.

It was when passing this tree that Wulfhild's attention was arrested by hearing a low growl beside her. Waldmann had opened his eyes and was regarding the tree with an air of suspicion, and Wulfhild, following the direction of his gaze, now observed an unusual movement in the branches, hardly to be accounted for by the presence of a bird or squirrel. Sharp rattling showers of beech-nuts and dead leaves were now falling to the ground. And while she stood there and watched, there appeared in sight a pair of long, lithe arms; then a small, dark head came in view; and finally the light, graceful figure of a young and superlatively handsome man swung himself over the wall, and with the aid of an overhanging branch, let himself drop on to the grass not ten paces from where Wulfhild was standing.

"Hippolyt," she cried out, hastening to his side in wondering delight. "Oh, Hippolyt, what happiness! Have I found you at last?"

The young man had turned round quickly at the first sound of her voice.

"Wulfhild! You here?" he exclaimed. "How come you here within this park?"

"Nay, rather, how come you here?" returned Wulfhild wonderingly. "My presence here is simple enough. I have been engaged by the Pfeilhofens as companion to their only daughter. But what were you doing when you jumped over that wall?"

"I?" replied Delius, *alias* Hippolyt, quickly regaining his presence of mind. "Oh, I came to look for you, of course."

"You came to look for me," taunted back Wulfhild, "when you did not even know of my being here!"

"Then I must have guessed it, I think," he said unabashed, and putting his arm round her waist with a gesture of which he had long since tested the efficacy. "It must have been a kind of presentiment, I suppose, which led me to climb that wall."

"And I," said Wulfhild, in a softer tone, "have been dreaming of you all night, my Hippolyt; and when daylight came I was driven by an irresistible impulse to come out here, little guessing that I was to find you!"

"Then that was presentiment number two," laughed Delius. "It is the day of presentiments, it seems."

"Oh, Hippolyt, I had such a dreadful dream," went on Wulfhild, pressing his hand tightly between her own.

"Dreadful? Why, you have just said that you were dreaming of me. There is nothing particularly dreadful about that, is there?"

"Yes," said Wulfhild, frowning. "But that was not all. There was another woman there who wanted to take you from me—a pale, shadowy woman whose face I could not see! She was holding you tight with two cold, white hands, and I was striving in vain to tear you from her grasp. Then I awoke, to find myself struggling with my pillow. Oh, Hippolyt, tell me that it is not true!"

"What is not true?" retorted Delius, still playfully. "That

you will have to fight for me with a pillow? Well, no, that is scarcely likely."

"Hippolyt, be serious, and tell me this one thing," and she laid her two hands on his shoulders with a gesture of fierce possession. "Say that you belong to me, and that no other woman shall ever come between us."

He shook off her hands a little impatiently.

"Really, Wulfhild, it is not my fault if you will go on disturbing yourself on account of ridiculous visions. I am not responsible for the follies you dream."

"Then you love me still the same as ever? Will you swear it to me?"

"I will swear anything you like, but only not here in the rain. This spot is over damp for lovers' oaths, I fancy. Let us go to the to—I mean, let us get under shelter somewhere. Is there no spot where we can at least be dry while we talk?"

"The big cedar tree yonder will be sufficient protection, and there is a bench beneath it," returned Wulfhild. And they moved off together in that direction.

Waldmann, who at first had expressed disapproval of the stranger's appearance in a couple of short barks, now approached with an air of fawning submission.

"Down, Waldmann, down!" said Delius authoritatively.

"You are making my clothes all muddy!"

"You know his name?" said Wulfhild, in astonishment.

"I happened to hear the huntsman calling him one day in the forest," said Delius, with ready invention.

"But the dog knows you. You cannot deny it."

"What is there to deny? Animals are always fond of me."

"Say rather that animals are always afraid of you. Just look at Waldmann, the fiercest and boldest of all the hounds, how he cringes before you and seems to dread the very look of your eye."

Delius laughed.

"I cannot pretend to be sufficiently interested in the

matter to attempt to analyse the motives which the brute may have for honouring me with his attention ; perhaps we may really have met before on some occasion, and his memory is better than mine, that is all."

But Wulfhild was only half satisfied with these plausible explanations, and during the conversation which ensued there was oftener a frown than a smile to be seen upon her face, even though her lover's arm was round her waist and his lips close to her own.

Their interview was unwatched by any eyes save those of their canine attendant, and of one red-coated squirrel busily engaged in completing its winter store in a hollow tree opposite ; but had there been anyone to look on and draw comparisons, he would have found a curious difference between this love scene under the cedar tree and those which had taken place in the deserted Herons' Tower. Here it was the woman who played the active part, and the man who was the recipient of attentions to which he submitted with barely concealed impatience. In his intercourse with Luitgard Delius had always felt as though he were wooing some timid woodland bird, whom a hasty or imprudent gesture might scare away from his side ; whereas the comparison suggested by Wulfhild would rather have been that of a hawk or eagle, with the fierce light of passion in its glowing eyes, and with strong, tenacious claws, which would never willingly relinquish aught once claimed as their own. To Delius, used of late to the more delicate flavour of Luitgard's maidenly, unconscious love, this violent, undisguised passion, in which he had found pleasure some months ago, now appeared coarse and crude by contrast. He was like a person accustomed to the fleeting, subtile fragrance of wood violet or wild rose, suddenly overpowered by an atmosphere redolent of stronger, ranker perfumes.

"So you are living here at Pfeilhofen?" said Delius tentatively after a time, in hopes of leading away the conversation from the wearisome topic of their undying affection. "It must be a dull life."

"Not dull now that I know you are near and will see me often," said Wulfhild, with a brilliant smile.

Wulfhild's smiles had something of the rapidity and brilliancy of lightning about them—they did not melt away, like ordinary smiles, to a more or less sweet or tender expression, but ceased as abruptly as they came, leaving her face with its habitual expression of semi-sullen defiance.

"And what is the family like?" went on Delius, pursuing his inquiries.

"You have not seen any of them?" asked Wulfhild, with a swift glance at her lover.

"No, how should I?"

"Oh, I merely thought you might perhaps have met some of them by chance, in the same manner in which you made Waldmann's acquaintance." And with her foot Wulfhild impatiently pushed away the staghound, which had lain down close to Delius. He merely smiled at her petulance and then continued—

"I have heard that the countess is a great invalid—what is she like?"

"She is worth ten men put together—worth a hundred such as her husband."

"Then it is she who governs the house, I suppose? Is she very severe, very harsh, do you think?"

"She does not love her husband. How should she? She loved someone else long ago."

That was not what Delius had meant to ask, but he deemed it prudent to alter the form of his inquiries.

"How do you pass your time there?" he said, playing with her ungloved hand. "What are your amusements?"

"Amusements?" repeated Wulfhild doubtfully. "Well, I am not sure that anyone rightly knows the meaning of that word at Castle Pfeilhofen. But there are to be some hunting parties next week, and possibly they may attempt to get up some galvanised species of gaiety in order to celebrate the wedding."

"The wedding?" asked Delius, with what unconsciousness he could assume.

"The wedding of Luitgard, the only daughter. She is to marry her cousin, the Italian Marchese Frecciacorte."

"And she, this Luitgard, is your friend, is she not?"

"Yes, I think she is," replied Wulfhild indifferently.

"And you talk over your heart secrets together, I suppose? Girls always do."

"Why should I tell her my secrets?" said Wulfhild impetuously. "Your name is far too precious to me to be spoken to anyone. It is buried here—deep down here in my heart!" And with a dramatic gesture Wulfhild pressed her two hands against her breast.

"And she?" asked Delius, in a low, constrained voice, which must have struck Wulfhild as unnatural had she not been intent on other thoughts. "What does she tell you?"

"She? Of course she tells me nothing—she has nothing to tell."

Delius drew a long breath of relief. But he had not finished his questions yet, and pursued them in a lighter tone.

"And what of him—of the bridegroom? Rich, young, and handsome, I suppose, as they tell us in fairy tales?"

Wulfhild began to laugh.

"Not rich, not young, not handsome, by any means. He is a poor cousin belonging to another branch of the family, and double the age of his bride."

"Then why"—began Delius.

"Why are they going to marry? Well, I am rather puzzled myself as to that—Luitgard, with her fortune and her—well, her beauty; for she is almost beautiful when you come to examine her, although very likely you might not think so—quite a different style from me, you know. But as I was saying, Luitgard, with her fortune and her looks, might have aspired to a much more brilliant marriage."

"I see," said Delius thoughtfully, half to himself. "Then the luck is all on his side, it seems, and he will never consent to break the engagement!"

"To break the engagement! Of course not! Why should it be broken?"

"I was only supposing. Such things do come to pass sometimes, but naturally such a man would be unwilling to relinquish his grasp on a fortune that has unexpectedly come in his way!"

Despite his caution, Delius had spoken with rather more warmth than the occasion of a perfectly unknown bridal couple seemed to warrant, and Wulfhild looked at him with surprise tinged with vague uneasiness.

"He will never give her up," she exclaimed, with heat equal to his own, "but not because of her fortune, as you imagine. He will stick to her because he loves her deeply and truly. Oh, Hippolyt, would I were only half as sure of your love for me as I am of Frecciacorte's attachment to Luitgard!"

Delius had some difficulty in concealing his consternation at this unexpected revelation. Only the urgent necessity of lulling to rest the suspicions which he saw ready to form in Wulfhild's mind enabled him to strangle down the oath that was rising to his lips. Wulfhild's delusions must be kept up at all hazards, for he knew the fatal strength of her love for himself, as also that she would recoil before no means to attain her end; but even while doing violence to his feelings, and forcing himself to submit to and return her caresses, the reiterated thought in his mind was this: "He loves her, he loves her too! He is not merely a man of starch and paste-board, as we imagined, but has actually got a heart of flesh and blood as well."

"Hippolyt," said Wulfhild, before they parted, "can you give me no hope as yet? This cruel uncertainty is killing me and driving me mad. When shall we be united, to part no more?"

"When? when?" said Delius gloomily. "How can I tell? When my adopted father dies and leaves me his fortune, perhaps. You know that just now I have no independent means, and that it would be the wildest folly to marry."

"I would be content with the humblest cottage," said

Wulfhild, laying her head on his shoulder. "As long as you shared it with me, I would work for my daily bread. I would not desire other pleasures, other luxuries, but your love alone. I have no other ambition but that of belonging to you."

"But I have," said Delius incautiously. "A man without ambition is a fool. An imprudent marriage entered upon before his fortune is assured has ruined many another man before me."

Wulfhild now put both her arms round his neck and whispered in his ear very low, although Waldmann had gone quite fast to sleep and the squirrel had retired out of sight within the hollow tree—

"I would never stand in your way, Hippolyt. I could not bear to be a clog round the neck of the man I love. You need not make me your wife, but take me with you as I am. I can no longer endure to live away from you, and I love you so that it will be no sacrifice to lose my good name for your sake."

When she had finished speaking Wulfhild bent back her head and looked him full in the face. A crimson wave of colour had spread over neck and forehead, but the eyes were firm and resolute in their unflinching gaze, and in their tawny depths there shone a wealth of smouldering passion.

But Delius disengaged himself almost roughly from her embrace.

"You do not know what you are saying, Wulfhild!" he cried. "Only a villain could take advantage of such an offer. We must have patience, as I told you before. Do not weary me with useless supplications, or I shall not come here again. If you will not consider your own good name, I must do so for you!"

He spoke with heat and indignation, as any honourable man would have done in his place; and how was Wulfhild to guess that he might have spoken very differently had he not chanced to pursue a nightingale across the park wall one sunshiny April day?

CHAPTER XVII

CHRISTOPH DORNDREHER

LONG after Delius had left her, Wulfhild remained standing under the dripping cedar tree, with bent head and frowning brow, in an attitude which had something almost wolf-like in its sullen defiance. The unexpected meeting with her lover had turned out scarcely more satisfactory than the troubled dream of last night. Scarcely even to herself could she have defined what it was she feared, nor could she have discovered a plausible reason for any shadow of distrust. Yet again and again she caught herself wondering how it came about that Hippolyt seemed so familiar with the dog, and why, on this dull and rainy morning, he had chanced to climb the park wall? With that detective instinct never totally wanting in a loving—still less in a jealous—woman, her restless eyes began presently to roam about in search of something, she knew not exactly what—some sign or indication that would change her doubts into certainty, and her uneasy discontent into acute misery. Hardly conscious of what she looked for, Wulfhild approached the wall and began to examine the place where she had seen her lover appear an hour previously.

The spot selected by Delius for his surreptitious visits to the Pfeilhofen park had long since recommended itself to his choice because of a favourable conjunction of circumstances. Some irregularities in the stone wall on the other side, then the kindly branch of fir stretched out so obligingly towards its beech-tree neighbour within the park. That fir branch once reached, it was easy to gain a grasp on the topmost stones of the wall, and thence, holding on to the elastic bough, to let

end. Wulfhild was at a loss where to seek for it further. At one side lay the lake, with the deserted Herons' Tower; at the other, the road which led to Castle Pfeilhofen. The rain was now beginning to fall with yet greater intensity, mingled with a small, driving sleet. Was she to turn to the right or the left? Wulfhild did not know.

At this juncture her reflections were interrupted by a shout coming from some little distance, and following up the direction whence it seemed to proceed, she espied a singular figure standing outside the iron-barred gate at the western side of the park. In former days, when Castle Pfeilhofen was the centre of gaiety and merry-making, each one of the four porticoes which gave entrance to its grounds, used to swing backwards and forwards on its hinges many times a day; but since gloom and solitude had settled down on the place, one gateway was considered ample for purposes of communication with the outer world. The southern gateway, being that which lay nearest to the castle, was therefore the only one kept in use and provided with a lodge-keeper, the remaining three being allowed to grow rusty on their hinges, and choked up by weeds and briars.

Behind the disused iron grating of the western portal, there now stood a crooked and hunchbacked figure, scarcely taller in height than a boy of twelve, but endowed with a long, tangled beard of flaming red, and bushy eyebrows of the same colour, overshadowing a pair of keen grey eyes looking out through gigantic silver-rimmed spectacles.

"Fair damsel," he now said, when Wulfhild had approached to within speaking distance, "pray tell me whether yonder crenellated tower argent, which I see emblazoned against a sable sky, belongs to Castle Pfeilhofen?"

"That is what they call the Herons' Tower," returned Wulfhild, pointing to the grey castellated battlement, which could just be descried overtopping the surrounding pine trees of the Heronry. "Castle Pfeilhofen itself lies at the farther end of the park. Do you want to go there?"

"Yes," replied the red-bearded pigmy. "I have been sent

hither in order to restore the family tree of the noble house of Pfeilhofen."

"Oh, so you are the herald they have been expecting," said Wulfhild, glancing rather disdainfully at the puny figure before her. "Very well, come in; I shall open the gate for you," and she proceeded to withdraw the heavy bolts, which, rusted from disuse, moved with considerable difficulty, emitting a succession of harsh, grating sounds most displeasing to the ear. But Wulfhild's arms were strong as those of a youthful Diana, and the old surly bolts were soon forced to yield to her vigorous attack. The exertion had brought a bright crimson flush into her cheek, and her rain-sparkling hair hung about her shoulders in picturesque disorder. The little man gazed up at her through the iron bars with undisguised admiration in his spectacled eyes.

"Such purpur! Such sable crines never yet have I beheld!" he muttered. "Is she not fit to be emblazoned on the escutcheon of any prince?"

"There, it is open," said Wulfhild at last. "You can come in if you list."

But the red-bearded dwarf, instead of advancing, now drew back a step. He had just caught sight of the large staghound behind the damsel.

"You are surely not afraid of a dog?" asked Wulfhild, with some contempt.

"No, no," said the hunchback doubtfully. "Not as long as he is merely couchant or even passant; but an alant proper, rampant or saliant, is an evil animal for which I have no great admiration, save upon a shield."

"Come in," repeated Wulfhild impatiently, "or I shall close the gate again. You have nothing to fear, for you are scarcely the sort of game which Waldmann cares to pursue. He is quiet enough, don't you see?"

"Maybe, maybe," said the little man timorously. "I will take your word for it, fair damsel, though he looks as though he might assume a rampant attitude at any moment. However, I am ready to risk it, if you will undertake to keep him

in a cowed position." And very slowly and cautiously he squeezed his puny person through the half-open gate, and stood by Wulfhild's side inside the park.

"You are vested over lightly, methinks, fair lady," remarked the little hunchback presently, as they were walking along the leafless chestnut alley towards the castle. "It is cold exceedingly, now that the sol is eclipsed and the sky has become nebulé. Surely it were more prudent to don a surcoat, or at the very least a courtoise, before gradiating in these blasted hursts? See, your sable crines are all guttée with the falling raindrops. Not but what it be vastly becoming, and garnishes you like veritable diamonds," he added, below his breath.

"Do you always talk that strange gibberish? Have you never learned to speak plain German?" retorted Wulfhild, taking no notice of the import of his speech.

"The heraldic language comes easier to me than any other," returned the dwarf, a trifle crestfallenly. "Having devoted my life to the study of that noble science and, so to say, imbibed it with my mother's milk, it is difficult for me to clothe my thoughts otherwise than in heraldic images and terms. And believe me, when you get to know it aright, to penetrate into its symbolic spirit and veiled mysteries, there is no language as fascinating, as enthralling, as vigorous and impressive as the language of heraldry. Is not every other tongue doomed to change and distortion? But heraldry is like nature, immovable and eternal. It is the bond which for centuries past has united all antiquarians, archæologists, men of letters and science; it forms the established code of recognition between all members of noble families of to-day, whose ancestors have conquered individual badges upon common battlefields. You cannot think how dull and pointless all other language appears to those to whom heraldry has become a second nature. Let me but be your teacher in this noble science, and you will assuredly acknowledge that I am right in maintaining it to be the finest, most desirable of all human arts!"

"No, thank you," replied Wulfhild, with a hard little laugh;

for her powers of endurance were well-nigh exhausted with the emotions she had gone through during the past two hours, and she felt unreasonably, illogically anxious to inflict pain upon someone. "You will never succeed in making of me a heraldic enthusiast. I only care for what is warm and living and young like myself, not for rusty, musty old shields and escutcheons. But you will find other congenial spirits at Castle Pfeilhofen, no doubt; old Bitterbalg is just such a lunatic about seals, and no doubt you will find him an apt and willing pupil!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AN ANCIENT BEAUTY

LATE that same evening old Countess Lilienfeld arrived. She appeared to be much fatigued by her long journey, and gazed about her in a bewildered and startled manner on entering the house. So evidently was she in need of rest that she was immediately conducted to her apartment ; so Luitgard's greeting had been confined to kissing her grandmother's hand before they separated for the night.

It was now over eight years since the old countess had last visited Pfeilhofen, yet her face was not strange to Luitgard ; for, as happens to people accustomed to seeing very few faces, she retained each image with a vividness and precision unknown to over-taxed memories burdened with crowded portrait-galleries. She remembered the vapid, good-natured smile perfectly well ; even the precise arrangement of the powdered curls and of the coquettish lace ruffles were familiar to her ; and in each bracelet on the slender wrists, in every single ring on the delicate fingers, she recognised an old acquaintance. The only perceptible difference about the old lady, to those who had not seen her for some years, was that everything about her person appeared to have shrunk and contracted. Her face, her figure, her hands, and everything else now appeared several sizes smaller than it used to be before. The sparkling gemmed rings rattled more loosely upon her delicate fingers than formerly, and her dress hung in slacker folds about her figure.

Luitgard lay awake a great part of that night thinking of

her grandmother and of the manner in which she would open her heart to her next day. She endeavoured to strengthen her resolution and give herself courage by recalling to memory all the little acts of kindness she had received at her grandmother's hands in former days; and, with the recapitulation of each one of these, did she feel herself to be a little way nearer to success.

She hopefully remembered how her grandmother had once begged off a lesson of catechism from Pater Ludolf, in order that she might hold a skein of orange-coloured silk which the countess was winding on to an ivory bobbin; how good-natured she had always been about unlocking her large rose-wood jewel-box, and trying on the diamond necklace or the sapphire coronet; how generous she used to be with the chocolate pastilles, always carried about in her pocket in a little enamelled *bonbonnière*; and what a pretty pink sash, quite broad and almost new, she had given her once as a birthday present. By the time Luitgard had reached the pink sash, she felt as though her point were already gained, and that she had only to sit down on a footstool at the old lady's feet, as she used to do ten years ago, and say to her, "Grandmother, my heart is breaking," in order to be quite, quite sure of her help and support. Having arrived at this comforting conclusion, Luitgard turned her face to the wall and slept more peacefully than she had done since the day of her betrothal.

When she awoke it was already late, and she dressed hastily, fearing to have overslept herself.

"Has my grandmother risen?" she inquired of Bitterbalg, meeting him in the corridor.

"Her graciousness has given orders not to be disturbed till eleven o'clock," was the answer, "and now it is only nine."

Two long hours before she could hope for the coveted interview! Luitgard thought the time would never pass, as with restless steps she paced the passage outside her grandmother's bedroom.

"Why do you not go downstairs?" said Wulfhild, catching sight of her as she passed. "The marchese has been waiting for you in the big saloon this hour or more."

"I daresay," said Luitgard indifferently.

"Shall I tell him that you are coming?"

"If you like."

Yet an hour later found Luitgard still at her post in the passage, gazing at the closed bedroom door as earnestly as though her salvation depended on seeing it open.

At last an elegantly got up *soubrette*, in muslin apron and cherry-coloured ribbons, approached the door on tiptoe, bearing a cup of chocolate on a silver salver. Noiselessly she disappeared into the room, and reissued as noiselessly some ten minutes later with the empty cup.

"My grandmother is awake now?" said Luitgard, timidly addressing the brilliant *soubrette*. "I suppose I may go in and wish her good-morning?"

"Go in to the countess before she is dressed!" exclaimed the maid, aghast. "Impossible, quite impossible. Your graciousness can surely not be aware"—

"Oh," said Luitgard, disappointed. "Then I must wait, I suppose. I shall come back in half an hour."

"My lady always takes two hours, sometimes more, to complete her toilet," was the discouraging reply, with which Luitgard was forced to content herself; and she went away wondering how it could be possible to spend two whole hours upon such an apparently simple thing as getting out of bed and putting on one's clothes? How could she have guessed at the varied and complicated manipulations daily required in order to knock off the appearance of a score of years from an old woman's age? What did she understand of the arduous task of curling a wig afresh? of the difficulty of hitting off precise shades of rose colour or ivory? of the all-important responsibility of determining the exact position of a patch?

At last, however, these various operations were satisfactorily concluded, and Luitgard, returning to her grandmother's door

for the twentieth time at least, was informed that she might now enter the apartment.

She found the old lady seated in a tapestried arm-chair, gorgeously attired in flowery pink brocade much adorned with heavy point lace, and with a glitter of diamond combs about her frosty locks, which were curled and twisted in fearful and wondrous fashion. In her slight, withered hands, considerably whiter than nature had ever intended them to be, the old lady held a piece of ephemeral-looking handiwork of the species called "Frivolité," that used to be much in fashion about the time of which I write. There was something almost childishly vivacious about the movement of the tiny hands as they tossed the tatting needles up and down with airy grace—one might almost have thought of a frolicsome infant playing with a feather ball.

"She always dresses so on Thursdays," whispered the *soubrette*, observing Luitgard's look of surprise. "Thursday is the reception day at court, and so she gets restless if not in full dress."

Not much enlightened by this explanation, Luitgard approached the arm-chair and said—

"Good-morning, grandmother. I hope you are rested?"

"Good-morning, my dear," returned the old lady briskly, interrupting her work for a moment in order to press a careful kiss upon her granddaughter's forehead. "How tall you have grown! and how pretty, to be sure! Kneel down there on the footstool, that I may look at your face. Take care! You are treading on my lace!" she added, with a petulant frown. "You remind me exactly of what I used to be at your age, twenty—or is it thirty years ago? Never mind. Who says that I look old? A woman is no older than she looks, you know. You understand me, child, do you not?"

"Yes, grandmother," said Luitgard, rather bewildered.

"Grandmother"? Do not speak so loud. You must not call me so before the duke, because he likes only to have young and handsome women about him. *La belle et blanche Comtesse Lilienfeld*, that is what he calls me. Oh, he is very

gallant, the duke, I assure you. Shall I tell you what he said to me the first day I wore this dress?"

"What did he say?" asked the granddaughter, with an effort to appear interested.

"Well," said the old lady, resuming her tatting, "I had put it on for the afternoon reception on the day when the Princess of Pardená was expected to arrive. (Such a fright as she is, my dear! though of course you must not say it too loud.) Well, as I was saying, I put on this dress for the first time; and when the dear duke caught sight of me, he left his place and came all the way across the room to speak to me.

"*Il parait madame que vous complex vos anneés par vos roses*"—that is what he said. Now, was not that a pretty thing to say?"

"But then"—began Luitgard, more and more puzzled by this singular chatter, and certainly not perceiving the point of the supposed compliment; but she was quickly interrupted.

"Perhaps you do not understand French?" said Countess Lilienfeld, seeing no responsive smile on her granddaughter's face. "I am sure that your education has been shockingly neglected. Do you not see it is quite plain, and means that, count the roses as you may I shall always be the fairest? Could anything be more neatly turned? He is sure to say something almost as pretty to you the first time he sees you at court. Now just wait and see if he doesn't." And she nodded her head several times in rapid succession, causing the diamond combs in the powdered curls to scintillate like frosty lightning.

"But I do not want to go to court, grandmother!" exclaimed Luitgard, thinking she had now hit upon the right opening to bring forward the subject of her unhappiness.

"Not go to court! Nonsense, child. Of course you will have to be presented as the wife of Marchese Frecciacane. I shall present you myself. And you can wear a dress exactly like mine if you please," she added, spreading out a piece of the brocade with a coaxing gesture, and pointing to the brilliant roses interwoven in the fabric as though offering a bribe to a refractory child.

"I don't want any dress, I don't want any roses," exclaimed Luitgard abruptly. "I do not want to be married at all. Oh, grandmother! Save me from this marriage, which is making me wretched!"

"Dear me, child," returned the old lady, raising her painted eyebrows in much surprise, and putting down the work on the table at her elbow, "what is the matter?"

"You will help me, grandmother? I was sure you would!" cried Luitgard, looking up hopefully into the bistre-shaded eyes of the old woman. "I cannot marry the marchese. It would kill me to become his wife!"

"Kill you, my dear!" said the dowager, with a frivolous little laugh. "You must not talk such nonsense. Nobody dies of being married, I assure you; and I ought to know, for I have been twice married myself. You see how well matrimony has agreed with me!" and she pointed gaily to the artificial roses on her cheek.

"Grandmother," said Luitgard very earnestly, taking hold of the wrinkled and be-ringed hand, "tell me this. Why did you marry my grandfather? Did you love him?"

"Of course I loved him, my dear," said the old lady placidly. "Not but what I have loved many other men besides him in my day. Did you never hear of the grand triangular duel fought at midnight under my windows by three of my hottest admirers?"

"Never!" exclaimed Luitgard, now completely startled; and, despite all anxiety to press her own question, she could not forbear asking, "And how did it end? Were any of the gentlemen wounded?"

"Stark dead, my dear, all three of them," said the dowager, with much apparent relish. "Each man was found next morning a frozen corpse, with his neighbour's poignard through his heart. You stare? And no wonder. 'Tis a compliment which few women can boast of, to be sure. Such are the triumphs and the trials of beauty!" and she hung her head with an air of affected modesty.

"But," continued Luitgard, in growing consternation,

"your second husband, Count Lilienfeld, why did you marry him?"

The countess now dropped her voice to a confidential whisper.

"I will tell you, my dear, if you promise not to repeat it. I married him just before your own father's marriage, in order to escape being called the old Countess Pfeilhofen. Don't you see that as soon as my son married, his wife—that is your mother—would naturally be called the young countess, and I would have become the old one, even though my hair was still brown and my eyes as bright as hers. So I wisely anticipated the event by changing my name," and she clapped her frail hands together, till the rings and bracelets jangled against each other like miniature castanets. "And now it is my daughter-in-law who will be called the old Countess Pfeilhofen, and you will be the young countess, if Frecciamonte takes back his German name."

"I shall never be the young Countess Pfeilhofen," cried Luitgard desperately. "Never, never! never! I would rather throw myself down from the Herons' Tower like Leonora!" And she suddenly laid her face in the flowery brocade lap, and burst into a flood of long pent-up tears.

"Good gracious, child!" exclaimed the countess, very much flustered. "What has come over you? I cannot make it out at all. You really must not cry like that, or you will make me cry as well; and that would be ruin to my complexion. And as to talking of throwing yourself down from the Herons' Tower, you know that is nonsense, for it would not be safe; and if you really must cry, I implore you not to do so on my brocade gown, or it will never be fit to be seen again at court. Luitgard, my dear child, what is the matter? Shall I give you some of my chocolate pastilles?" And she fumbled nervously in her pocket for the little enamelled box.

Poor Luitgard! And was this the prop she had hoped to lean upon? This vain and frivolous woman, who even in her

best days had had nothing but a superficial amiability to recommend her, and the worthlessness of whose light and shallow nature was now laid bare by the pitiless hand of declining reason? It is only in old age, when such draping and shrouding influences as beauty, grace, self-possession, and wit, having fallen away from a person, that we can in truth justly estimate what that person was really worth in bygone years. So long as the full tide of life is flowing, casting misleading soft shadows and crystal sparkles into the water, it is impossible to guess what lies below. But when the ebb-tide sets in, concealment is at an end, and we may then either chance to behold a rich treasure of sparkling gems, or a sorry display of mud and slush. It is, in fact, only when a woman is eighty, that we can know for certain whether she was worth adoring at twenty; and such tardy enlightenment being of questionable utility to mankind, it is surely preferable that the amiable delusions which have helped to make the greater part of our lives endurable, should be kept up a little longer, rather than be rudely dispelled on the brink of the grave!

Countess Lilienfeld had been one of those singularly successful women who pass through life without knowing aught of its griefs and trials. None of her numerous *affaires de cœur* had ever impaired her sleep or her appetite, and she had buried her two husbands without detriment to either eyes or hair. Her long life had been like that of a child disporting itself among flowers and butterflies; pain and grief did not exist for her, simply because she was incapable of feeling them. Even old age had failed to bring with it that bitter disillusionment which it brings to most women who have lived for admiration alone; for the hour of discovering that her beauty was gone and her power at an end, had never struck for her. Within the last year, her mind had begun to give way in a gradual, painless fashion; but while reason was confused and memory uncertain, one faculty remained undimmed and unshaken. Vanity, stronger than death, tenacious as life itself, kept persistently showing her roses in the place of wrinkles,

as with one foot already in the grave this frivolous old woman continued to babble complacently of the triumphs of half a century ago !

Poor Luitgard ! the help you seek is not to be found here.
You must look for it elsewhere !

CHAPTER XIX

LUITGARD'S APPEAL

ONE evening, somewhat before the middle of November, Othmar, sitting dreamily before his spinnet, was aroused by Bitterbalg's voice alongside.

"I thought to find the Herr Graf in his hunting chamber," said the old servant, with a tinge of reproach in his voice, intended to convey the lesson that toying with his weapons or gloating over sporting trophies, rather than crouching over an organ like a shaven friar in his cloister cell, was the fitting pastime for a Pfeilhofen.

"I was—I was only trying to remember something—an air," returned Othmar, instinctively taking his hands off the instrument.

"The music of the hunting horns will be the music best fitted for your gracious ear, I'm thinking," replied Bitterbalg, in a mysterious tone, indulging in a pause in order to give greater weight to what was still to come.

"What is it, Bitterbalg?" asked Othmar somewhat testily, beginning to feel vaguely irritated at the old servant's manner.

"I have brought good news for the Herr Graf, joyful news that will make his heart leap in his body."

The count did not answer. Perhaps experience had taught him to receive Bitterbalg's good news with suspicion.

"Gottschalk has just been here to say that there is a prime wild boar in the forest close by."

"Indeed," said the count, trying to rouse himself to an expression of interest.

"As fine a fellow as you may wish to see, Gottschalk tells me. It must have come a long way off, he says, for he knows most of our boars by sight, but such a large one as this he never yet saw within the Pfeilhofen domains—a perfect giant, that is what Gottschalk says."

"Yes," said Othmar rather faintly.

"He followed the tracks for over a mile in the snow. As large as a donkey's hoofs they are—larger," added Bitterbalg, who, seeing an expression of incredulity in his master's eye, was determined to soften no details of this formidable description. "Tusks that length," he continued, indicating something about half a yard in the air.

"Nonsense Bitterbalg," said Othmar fretfully; "no boar can have tusks of half a yard's length."

"Then your graciousness can go and measure the tusks for yourself if you do not believe me," said Bitterbalg, with dignity. "Gottschalk says it is a boar worthy of a Pfeilhofen's spear, and Gottschalk is a man who is wary of his words. Shall I call him in here, that your graciousness may know that I am saying no more than the holy gospel truth?"

"No, no, Bitterbalg. There is no need to speak to Gottschalk. What does it matter how long precisely the boar's tusks may happen to be?"

"Then what shall I say to Gottschalk? He is waiting below."

"Nothing," returned Othmar, beginning unconsciously with his left hand to finger an accompaniment.

"Then," said Bitterbalg, looking at his master very much as does a spider watching the fly walk into the trap prepared for it, "then, if your graciousness has no other orders to give, I suppose I can tell Gottschalk that the hunt can take place to-morrow at break of day."

"To-morrow!" exclaimed Othmar, aghast. "Why to-morrow? You know quite well that the boar hunting was not to begin till after the 15th."

"Gottschalk says that it would be unwise to put off the pursuit of this particular boar a single day further. These

mighty boars are apt to change their haunts, and if your graciousness be not quick, the noble *keiler* may be far away on the other side of the hills in twenty-four hours, and that would surely be a heavy grief for a Pfeilhofen?"

Othmar thought that for this particular Pfeilhofen there could be no greater bliss than to know himself separated by many miles of densest forest from the noble animal in question. He felt not the smallest desire to thwart its movements, and was perfectly willing to give it the freedom of the Pfeilhofen domains, on the condition that he was not to be put to the disagreeable necessity of pursuing or killing it. However, it would never have done to breathe a word of these unworthy sentiments, and so, all unconscious of having betrayed what was passing in his mind, he merely said resignedly—

"Very well, Bitterbalg; let it be to-morrow."

He turned back to the spinnet, and endeavoured to resume the symphony he had been playing; but the notes refused to come as smoothly as before, and the chords sounded false and jarring to his ear. All the harmony and peacefulness seemed to have fled from the music, whereto lately he had so often had recourse in order to distract his mind from the conflicting thoughts that were disturbing it. He had never so far succeeded in silencing his conscience as to feel at ease in the presence of that tall, silent man in the faded coat. Every stain on his well-worn garments, seemed to be a living reproach to Othmar, every threadbare seam had the semblance of jeering at the man who was basely keeping the birthright of another. Even the apparent smoothness wherewith the engagement to Luitgard had been effected, had failed to bring altogether the anticipated relief. True, Frecciaccorte would now by an innocent fraud be put in possession of the fortune which should have been his long ago; but he would now be accepting it as a favour, not taking it as a right; and instead of the lawful pride of possession his would only be the half-defiant gratitude of a proud man who resigns himself to accept favours from another. And to a delicate perception of right and wrong, surely it is as great an injury to defraud a

man of his legitimate pride as to rob him of his gold? And Othmar was endowed with a conscience exceedingly delicate and self-tormenting, though cursed with a will proportionately weak and vacillating; and not all Hedwig's arguments, nor her imperious way of considering the matter as settled, could restore the peace which had never been his since the discovery of Eberhard's will. And, as though further to enhance his mental discomfort, the marchese had shown himself very unmanageable with regard to the marriage contract, imperiously insisting that his wife's fortune should be settled entirely on herself; and only two days since a little incident had occurred of which Othmar could not think without a blush of shame.

Luitgard and Wulfhild, along with himself and the marchese, had all come out on to the doorsteps in order to gaze at the sheet of fallen snow which had come to surprise them in the night. To the Italian-bred marchese the sight was of course a novel one, and he gazed with a sort of shivering interest at this vast winding-sheet of Nature, unknown in his smiling Fatherland. Wulfhild, standing on the lowest step, was amusing herself by kicking away the heavy snow layer with the point of her shoe, finding apparently much enjoyment in watching the smoke-like powder raised by her slightest touch; and Luitgard, staring blankly at the outstretched white carpet, was sadly wondering how she would now be able to reach the Herons' Tower, since the tell-tale snow would betray her footsteps.

"Look yonder!" cried Wulfhild suddenly. "Is there not something red lying on the bench under the first big tree? What can it be, I wonder?"

"It looks like a rag of some kind," said the marchese indifferently.

"No," said Wulfhild contradictorily, "it looks like something far more valuable—perhaps a book or a reticule which has been forgotten out there. Oh, I am almost sure it is a book. What will you wager, marchese?"

"I do not bet," coldly returned the Italian.

"You do not bet, and you are not at all curious to know

what it is. Then at least take pity on my curiosity, and go and fetch it for me."

The marchese hesitated for a moment, and seemed to be measuring the space with his eye before he answered—

"Waldmann will render you this service quite as well as I could do, mademoiselle." And, obedient to his gesture, in the next moment the large staghound had plunged through the deep snow with boisterous enjoyment, to return presently bearing in his mouth a dead robin-redbreast.

"Only a dead bird!" said Luitgard.

"I knew it was only a bird," said Wulfhild, in a malicious whisper to her friend. "But I wanted to force your illustrious cousin to wet his feet in the snow. He seems as careful of his feet as though he were made of sugar."

"Why did you not go?" asked Luitgard, impulsively turning to her bridegroom.

"I would have gone at once had I known you desired it," he returned, flushing slightly, "but there seemed no urgent necessity for it, and"—he hesitated for a moment, as though struggling with himself, and then finished his phrase looking her steadily in the face, though his colour continued to rise, "I have but one pair of these cut steel buckles, and they would have been ruined in the snow. A poor man is obliged to consider such prosaic details."

It was just because Gastone Frecciacorte suspected himself of a desire to conceal his poverty, that he was almost morbidly punctilious in calling attention to it whenever occasion offered; and precisely this harping upon a distasteful subject was like gall and wormwood to Othmar's tormented conscience. On the present occasion it touched him to the quick.

"Marchese!" he exclaimed, as soon as they were alone, taking hold of the well-worn sleeve, "in a few weeks you will be my daughter's husband; you are, in fact, almost my son-in-law. Why will you not consider yourself as already belonging to the family, and permit me to offer you a portion of what will soon be yours by right?" And here he made a hasty and somewhat embarrassed movement, as though he would

have drawn out his purse ; but the expression of quiet dignity in his kinsman's face arrested the awkward gesture.

"You would offer me money?" he had said, in a tone of pained surprise, "because you think I am too shabbily attired to befit your son-in-law?"

"But the money will soon be your own," pleaded the unhappy Othmar.

"My wife's, not my own ; that is what I never shall forget. Forgive me, my cousin, if I spoke hastily, but it is the thought of that fortune which lies like lead upon my soul. If I could have won Luitgard without her money I should have been a far happier man."

"But you cannot have her without her fortune," had said Othmar, trying to speak playfully. "That is the only comfort in this wretched matter," he had added to himself *setto voce*.

That night Othmar slept uneasily, and was pursued in his dreams by feverish visions of monstrous boars, fierce and bristling, adorned with elephantine tusks and gigantic hoofs. He awoke with a start, to hear the hunting horns playing the *reveil* before the castle, as was the custom on hunting mornings. Nor was Bitterbalg's conversation, while he attended on his master's toilet, calculated to restore equanimity to his troubled spirit. An unusual solemnity pervaded the old servant's manner as he assisted Othmar to draw on the long pigskin hunting boots and buckled the belt which confined the jerkin to the waist. One might almost have thought that he was assisting a monarch to don his coronation robes.

"His graciousness will do well to take his strongest and sharpest cutlass to-day," he remarked, "and," he continued, drawing a small silken bag from his pocket, "it will not be amiss to hang this about his neck."

"Why?" asked the count, in some surprise. But Bitterbalg only answered his question by another.

"How many wild boars has your graciousness already killed in these forests?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Othmar indifferently. "Some

thirty or forty perhaps. I suppose they are all noted down in the hunting register."

"His graciousness does not know," said the old servant, with ill-disguised contempt, "does not remember how often he has plunged his cutlass in the throat of a boar! But Gottschalk knows, and Gottschalk is a man who never makes a mistake. Thirty-nine boars has the Herr Graf already killed."

"It may be," said Othmar languidly. "Very likely Gottschalk is right, but what has that to do with my sharpest cutlass? And what is there inside that little blue silk bag?"

Bitterbalg loosed the strings with an air of profoundest mystery, disclosing a rude sort of necklace made of lobsters' claws strung together, originally boiled to a vivid red hue, but now faded and bleached as though from exposure to wind and weather.

"Has your graciousness forgotten what is said about the fortieth boar? Not to one man in a hundred is it given to kill it, and many a man has lost his life in attempting to do so. But whosoever succeeds in killing his fortieth boar, is henceforth assured against all further accidents, and may go to the chase with a pocket-knife only, for the boars can do him no further injury, and he will kill each one without difficulty. It all depends on the fortieth boar—either you kill him, or he kills you."

"Nonsense, Bitterbalg!" said Othmar, with unaccountable irritation. "How can you prate of such foolish, idle superstitions like any old village crone?"

But Bitterbalg shook his head ominously.

"Herr Graf, that is not a superstition; that is a well-grounded belief among all huntsmen throughout Germany. If it were not so, why does every peasant who has killed thirty-nine boars desist from the chase and tempt his luck no further? Did not Gottschalk's own grandfather meet his death in this fashion? As he was on his way to the forest in quest of his fortieth boar he was met by a strange individual (some do say it was the Black Huntsman himself), who called upon him to turn back and seek to injure no more boars, for that would

bring him bad luck. He refused to listen, and next morning was found dead in the forest."

"And are you wanting me to do like the peasants, and shirk the chase?" asked Othmar, with rather a sickly smile, and yet not speaking wholly in jest.

"Your graciousness is pleased to joke," said Bitterbalg. "I only spoke of common peasants and such-like. Of course, no Pfeilhofen would ever think of shirking danger, and many among your noble ancestors have killed their fortieth boar, and lived long and merrily afterwards. But wherefore should you not take a few reasonable precautions, all the same? Your graciousness doubtless knows that lobsters' claws are said to be an infallible talisman against the wild boar's tusks. An extra hunting knife, and maybe a dash of holy water before starting can do no harm."

As Othmar went into the hunting chamber in order to fetch the sharpest cutlass, which Bitterbalg had so emphatically recommended, he found Luitgard standing there near the window, looking yet paler than usual. She too had been having a restless night, it seemed.

"Good-morning, my child," said Othmar, his face brightening at sight of her. "Are you up so early?"

Luitgard did not speak, but going straight to her father, looked up into his face with such an expression of wistful, passionate yearning that Othmar felt a sudden panic come over him.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "Luitgard, you have something to tell me?"

It was more an assertion than a question, and no answer was given or required. Luitgard suddenly relaxed her clinging hold on her father's arm and took two turns in the room, as if struggling for composure, then, stopping again before him, she began to speak in short, panting accents.

"I cannot do it, father; I cannot! I cannot marry this man whom you have said shall be my husband. I have tried to submit, have tried to accustom myself to the idea; but it is of no use, it is killing me. I would rather die, I would rather

throw myself from the tower, than become his wife—indeed I would.”

In this way she continued to speak unchecked for some minutes, for Othmar was far too much taken by surprise to think of interrupting his daughter. Despair and excitement had lent abnormal eloquence to the words that flowed from her lips in a low, passionate torrent; but what they said was always the same thing over and over again. She could not marry him! she was miserable! she would die if not released from this hateful promise!

“But, Luitgard, my child,” exclaimed Othmar, when he had recovered from the first shock of his surprise, “why do you say all this only now? You said not a word of dissent when your engagement was proposed?”

A faint tinge of colour came into her pale cheek.

“I had not thought—I did not understand it then. Now I—I understand better.”

The last words were breathed so low that he scarcely heard them.

“And,” he continued, taking hold of his daughter’s two hands, and drawing her towards him while wistfully he scanned her white and strained face, “you know how anxious your mother and I have been for this marriage to take place. It seemed as though Heaven itself had ordained it to be.”

“Why?” questioned Luitgard, looking up in his face with sudden directness. She had now recovered her composure, and was only still trembling slightly.

“Why?” repeated Othmar, starting rather guiltily, “why, because it would have been such an excellent arrangement in every way to reunite the two estranged branches of the Pfeilhofen family. Think of how long Konrad and his descendants have been living as exiles in a foreign land. You will not require to change your name, nor need Castle Pfeilhofen pass on to a stranger family. Had your brother Kunibert lived, your marriage would have been of far less consequence than it is now; but being the last representative

of the family, it is important that the Pfeilhofen arms should be united to Pfeilhofen over again."

"And is that sufficient reason to blight my life and break my heart?" burst forth again from Luitgard with the same suppressed vehemence as before. "Must I be sacrificed for the sake of a name and a coat of arms? Oh, would that Kunibert had lived indeed, in order that I might have been free to choose my life for myself!"

Othmar stared at his daughter in growing surprise and consternation. He hardly recognised her thus transformed by the workings of a passion whose signification eluded his comprehension. Where had she learnt that fevered eloquence? And who had taught her those expressive gestures? that vibrating intonation of voice? She must be raving, she did not know what she was saying, he told himself, as all the inevitable consequences of her refusal to wed her cousin began to whirl through his brain. Was the old weary burden of Eberhard's will to be laid upon his shoulders again with renewed pressure? If Luitgard refused to marry the marchese, how then was the unjustly withheld property to be restored? Some effort must be made to bring his daughter to reason.

"Luitgard," he said, in a pleading, almost a humble, tone of voice, "will you not consider what you are saying? Do you know that if you renounce this marriage you will make me very unhappy, and your mother as well? It will break her heart."

Her face had softened for a moment at his first words, but at mention of her mother it hardened again.

"And my heart will break if I am forced to marry him."

Her father continued—

"You know nothing of the world, Luitgard. You have seen no other men as yet."

"Then why should I bind myself already to the only one I know?"

"If you had seen other men, perhaps you would better know how to value him. Luitgard, he is a good man. There are not many such in the world, and he loves you truly."

"Possibly," she answered coldly, with the selfish indifference of youth; "but I do not love him, and never shall." Then, with a sudden change of expression, she dropped on her knees exclaiming, "Oh, father, father! would you make your own child miserable? What have I done that my life should be blighted and my youth sacrificed? Help me! Help me! No one can save me if you will not!"

Othmar could fight no longer against the despairing anguish in his daughter's face. He could not bear to see her kneeling thus before him like a condemned criminal, imploring mercy. His soft heart could never stand the sight of pain, physical or mental, and his sense of justice revolted at the idea of selling his child against her will. Passionately he seized her in his arms, and clasped her to his heart while he exclaimed—

"You shall not be made miserable. Your life shall not be blighted, Luitgard, my child! Let everything go to the winds rather than that my daughter should break her heart. Please God, I shall yet do my duty as an honest man, by telling the truth, and making amends before it is too late."

The latter part of this speech was unintelligible to Luitgard, but she left her father's presence with the comforting conviction that her cause was gained, and that her marriage to the Marchese Frecciacorte would never take place.

CHAPTER XX

OTHMAR'S RESOLVE

OTHMAR was not allowed much time for reflection ere hounds and huntsmen were already at the door, and he was summoned to take his place among them. Actuated by some feeling which he was careful to avoid analysing, he, contrary to habit, refrained from going to his wife's room to bid her farewell. He did not care to encounter her keen penetrating glance just then; and the sight of her cold hard face might have shaken, or at least disturbed, his resolution.

For Othmar had come to a mighty resolve, and he honestly intended to keep it. With the impetuosity of many a weak-willed man, aware of his weakness, he was determined to execute it as rapidly as possible; to burn his vessels, and make the thing inevitable, beyond recall. He would confess everything to Gastone Frecciacorte, and throw himself on his kinsman's mercy. He would tell him the history of Eberhard's will, and would likewise tell him that Luitgard could never be his wife. Gastone Frecciacorte would take back the fortune that in reality was his own, and Othmar would regain that peace of mind to which he had now for many months been a stranger. Moreover, this resolve must be executed to-day ere they returned to the castle, and on his return he would then announce it to his wife. Hedwig would then be powerless to alter what was irrevocably consummated, and would have to resign herself to the inevitable. The long day's hunt would doubtless offer many

opportunities for private conversation, and the very first of these Othmar was resolved to secure.

Nevertheless, it was not until late in the day that Othmar found himself alone with the marchese. The party intended to start from the castle had originally consisted of four, for Wulfhild, clad in a riding costume of ruby cloth and with a dagger stuck in her belt, had appeared on the door-steps, and announced her intention of following the chase. Besides the count and the marchese there was also the enamoured little herald, who, albeit looking extremely uncomfortable in his hunting accoutrements, had yet been unable to resist the attractions of Wulfhild's society.

This would exactly fit into his plans, thought Othmar; for while Dorndreher was making love to Wulfhild, he himself could have a quiet talk with the marchese. He felt that he could not breathe freely until this was off his mind.

But capricious Fate ordained it otherwise, and just as they were about to start Wulfhild caught sight of Luitgard standing upstairs at an open window watching their departure. She had come to the window in order to exchange a final glance of secret understanding with her father.

"Good-bye, Luitgard," called up Wulfhild to her friend.

"Good-bye, Waidmannsheil," came back in Luitgard's low, sweet voice; but something in the tone struck Wulfhild, for it seemed to her ear that there was a covert joyousness in the sound, and glancing up more sharply it appeared to her as though Luitgard's eyes were beaming as they had but seldom lately beamed.

"Why does she look so happy?" she asked herself, with quick suspicion. "Is it because we are going away, and she will be alone all day? Hum, let me see!"

The four riders proceeded on abreast for some minutes in silence, for it had been arranged that they were to ride to the place of rendezvous in the forest, both hounds and huntsmen having been sent on ahead by a shorter cut, and Othmar was just considering the expediency of

dropping behind with his kinsman when Wulfhild suddenly exclaimed—

"I am not going to join the hunt after all. I have sprained my foot ; I hurt it against the stirrup in mounting. It is beginning to swell already, and I must go back at once and bandage it up." And veering her horse abruptly round she rode back, before anyone could answer or object, to the castle, which reaching, she lightly jumped to the ground in a manner scarce compatible with the sprained ankle from which she had just declared herself to be suffering.

The quartette thus suddenly metamorphosed into a trio, to the great annoyance of two out of the three persons, proceeded on its way, each man wrapped up in his own thoughts, and hardly a word being interchanged until they had reached the point in the forest whence the chase was to be pursued on foot.

Here about a dozen squires and noblemen of adjacent estates had joined the party ; for, despite the state of retirement in which the Pfeilhofen family lived, it was an understood thing in those parts that the hunting field is open to all on such occasions, and no man durst be so churlish as to close his *reviers* to his neighbours. Numerous retainers were in attendance holding in leash the large bloodhounds, or carrying the short, strong spears termed *Sauweisen*, wherewith to receive a charging boar. Each man, gentleman, or forester had besides at his belt the *Hirschfänger*, a short, straight cutlass, the weapon used for giving the *coup de grâce* to a dying boar pinned down by the hounds.

The day was dull and gloomy ; the sun, hidden behind the clouds, had been unable to disperse the brooding mist that seemed to be a joint production of earth and sky ; the breath of the snow which had already fallen mingled with that which was yet to come. Phantom-like, the black tree stems loomed through the fog, and coldly desolate the white carpet lay over everything. The bright hunting costumes, the joyful bark of the impatient bloodhounds alone redeemed the sombre

character of the scene. It was a bright picture set in a gloomy framework.

By and by the chase began in earnest. A boar was tracked, and the hounds being loosed had soon brought down their quarry. Another and another were disposed of in succession with more or less display of valour on the part of both dogs and hunters, but as yet no boar had given Othmar the chance of aiming a thrust at it. By five o'clock in the afternoon four good-sized boars lay outstretched on the bloodstained snow, while some of the attendants were employed in forming pine-branch litters whereon to convey home these trophies of the chase. It was a fairly good, although by no means an exceptional, result for the Pfeilhofen *revier*.

Gottschalk alone was dissatisfied, for none of these animals came up to the standard of that prime wild boar whose tracks he had followed but yesterday; and when you have once set your heart upon an eagle, it is hard to be obliged to content yourself with any number of well-grown falcons. Moodily he surveyed the four bristly carcasses which were being laid out in state.

"There's not one of them that can hold a candle to my fine fellow of yesterday," he muttered. "And I suppose he's now as good as lost for us, twenty miles off, no doubt; for at this rutting season the boars will sometimes cover half the country in the night-time. Pity the chase was not ordered a day sooner. Nothing more to be done to-day I fear, Herr Graf?"

"Nothing, nothing," said Othmar eagerly. The day had seemed very long to him, and he was glad to think it was nearly over.

Soon the strangers had dispersed, and the party from the castle began to turn homewards. Leaving the bulk of the huntsmen crowding round the fir-tree litters, Count Pfeilhofen proposed that they should take a short cut through the forest, that would bring them faster to the point where the horses had been ordered to meet them.

"We may as well take a couple of hounds with us in case of meeting a stag or doe," suggested Gottschalk, who was to act

as guide. So, followed by him and one other attendant, the three gentlemen proceeded to break their way through the brushwood. It was hard work wading through the deep snow and bending the snow-laden branches aside—conversation was not possible under these circumstances; but, when they had reached a smoother path, Othmar slackened his pace and allowed the little herald to walk on ahead of them. Gottschalk was close behind, but then Gottschalk could not speak French, and it was in this language that Othmar opened the conversation.

"My cousin," he said, laying his hand on the other's arm to compel his attention and arrest his pace, "will you do me the favour to listen to me awhile. I have something to tell you—something of importance, which you must hear at once—to-day."

Othmar's heart was beating so loudly as he spoke as almost to hinder his utterance; but it was the very extent of his emotion which lent him the courage of despair, causing him to plunge blindly into the confession.

"I am at your service," returned the marchese, with a little surprise, thinking no doubt that walking uphill in a snow-clad forest was scarcely the place for important conversation.

But now that he had secured his auditor's attention, it did not seem very easy for Othmar to proceed. Wildly he strove to collect his ideas and to arrange his disclosure in logical sequence. Was he first to inform his kinsman that the fortune was his, and then go on to say that Luitgard could never be his wife? Or was he to begin with the daughter and then to proceed to the fortune? Throughout that long day he had been preparing suitable phrases in his mind wherewith to open out the subject, but now that the moment had come, it seemed as though all these carefully prepared sentences were fading away and eluding him. Wildly he grasped at the first words that came uppermost.

"A great wrong has been done to you, my cousin, a great wrong; but it is still time to repair it. It can all be made right again—indeed it can; and, after all, only a few months

will have been lost. The rest of your life will be happy and prosperous. You are a generous man, and will surely forgive this slight delay."

Here Othmar paused and breathed heavily once or twice, then with an effort he went on—

"Forgive me if I cause you pain. I am about to deal you a heavy blow by destroying your hopes."

The marchese now turned a scrutinising glance upon his kinsman, and was struck by his pale and agitated countenance. What did he mean by speaking of prosperity in one breath, and blighted hopes in the next? His manner suggested brain affection. Was he not over-tired by the fatigues of the chase? He had not been looking well for some days past.

"Calm yourself," he said, taking hold of Othmar's hand, which, even through the glove, felt hot and feverish. "We can talk at our ease at home after you have rested."

But Othmar was not to be tranquillized.

"No, no," he urged, with feverish intensity. "After we reach home it may be too late. I may—be prevented. Let me tell you now—now, at once, before I have time to—to think differently."

His manner was so strangely eager that it could not fail to impress his companion in spite of himself, and he was beginning some words of serious inquiry, when an unexpected interruption turned both their thoughts into another current.

For the last ten minutes they had been walking uphill in a sort of rough cart track, used in dry weather for bringing wood from the forest. On either side the hazel boughs stretched forward overhead till they almost met in the centre, forming a natural arcade tremulously green in summer, but now changed by the hoar frost into the semblance of branching white coral. And yonder, farther up, there were pink coral branches; for there the dying sun, fast disappearing over the hill, was shedding a flood of rose-coloured light over everything.

Count Pfeilhofen and the marchese, looking up, saw the

figure of the little hunchback, in strong relief against the crimson sky, making violent and unintelligible signals to them to approach. Their curiosity greatly excited, they were at his side in a moment.

"What is it?" they both inquired in the same breath.

"Hush," said Dorndreher, laying his finger on his lips and speaking in a hoarse whisper. "Do you not see? There in the centre of the field argent?"

Following the direction of his pointing finger, a striking picture met their eyes.

They were now standing at the top of a little ridge, and straight before them lay an open space framed in by dark fir trees on all sides. The air up here was clearer than down in the hollows, and it was here that the rays of the departing sun descended in full glory, drawing blood-like streaks across the snow. It was a sort of natural amphitheatre, and the silent pines all around had something of the appearance of spectators ranged in order to witness a performance. Nor were the actors wanting from the scene; for there, in the very centre of the arena, right in the midst of the crimson glare, two boars were tilting at each other with their sharp white tusks.

That they were unequally matched was obvious at first sight, the one being but a fairly well-grown animal of three, or at the utmost four years of age, while the other, a veteran of seven or eight, was a very giant of his species, whose bristles had the consistency of iron wire, and whose tusks approached elephantine dimensions. Never since this majestic animal could remember had he been vanquished in single combat, and it was with the arrogant self-sufficiency of unassailable strength and undisputed power, that he regarded his youthful adversary. The younger boar, though far inferior in build and development, had a heart as sturdy and valorous as the other; the impulsive fire of youth stood him in stead of sterner physical qualities; and penetrated by the full dignity of his budding manhood, he was determined to yield no inch of ground to this arrogant stranger. Who was this insolent interloper, this surly Diogenes, who, having disdained the

charms of sweet family society during the merry summer season, must now, forsooth, step in and claim the prize which another had earned by faithful and unswerving attachment? Upon what grounds does he presume to disturb the peace of a family circle which hitherto had been unconscious of his existence? Thus bristling all over with the sense of injustice, acting up to the axiom that none but the brave deserve the fair, the youthful hero lowers his head and rushes again at his opponent.

Meanwhile the "fair," represented by some two or three mud-coloured quadrupeds, grouped together at a little distance, along with their half-grown children, last year's progeny, await the result of the contest with a phlegmatic patience which renders it difficult to penetrate their own individual feelings in the matter. Are their sympathies with Diogenes or with the youthful Seladon? None can tell, as little as the eye of a woman will afford a clue to her preference unless she be so minded. The younger boars, having no interest at all in the matter, have closed their eyes, and are enjoying a brief snatch of slumber, dreaming perchance of the luscious snails and succulent blindworms, which during the past weeks have so mysteriously disappeared from the face of the earth.

Such was the picture disclosed before the eyes of the three men, who, peeping cautiously through the frosty branches, held their breath from fear of startling the performers. None of the three spectators being of particularly bloodthirsty nature, the idea of pursuit did not instantaneously occur to their minds, and the interest of watching the contest had more fascination just at that moment.

But Gottschalk, now coming up behind, was of different opinion, and loosening the two bloodhounds with a triumphant shout of "Hus Sau! Hus Sau!" effected an abrupt transformation in the scene.

Lightning-like the two combatants had started asunder, while the female and juvenile portion of the party disappeared squealing and grunting into the bushes. The two noble hounds, with one accord, fixed upon the giant boar as the foeman best worthy of their steel, and in far less space than it takes to

record, had reached him and were holding him down on either side.

"Well done, Waldmann! Hold fast, Nimrod!" shouted Gottschalk, in stentorian accents. Two of the gentlemen drew their *Hirschfänger* to be in readiness to despatch the struggling boar; the third had no need of such precautions, for he, the herald, was already safely ensconced far overhead in the forked branch of an ancient oak tree.

But before anyone had had time to reach the end of the open meadow where the struggle was going on, the giant boar, by a mighty effort, had wrenched himself free from the hounds, and, trampling their prostrate bodies in the snow, prepared for flight.

"At him, Waldmann! Hold him, Nimrod!" shouted Gottschalk, in despair at the thought of losing the finest boar of the season; and, animated by his voice, the gallant hounds were soon again at his heels, clinging on to him at either side with bur-like tenacity as the boar fled through the brushwood.

This had all passed so rapidly, that no one had had time to give a thought to the second boar, which, standing beneath a pine tree, was at least as much bewildered as any of the spectators. He was only aware that someone had stepped in between himself and his antagonist; he only felt that his limbs were strong, and longed to gauge their youthful virility against that of some other foe; he only knew that his tusks were sharp, and yearned to test their ivory points against living flesh of some kind. Having wound himself up to such a pitch of righteous passion, in the assertion of his disputed rights, he must perforce vent his fury upon someone. Seeing two men before him, he rushed blindly in their direction, with bristles erect and small eyes glaring with malice. Neither Othmar nor Gastone were prepared for the attack, their eyes being turned in the other direction, till Gottschalk's shout of "Look out, gentlemen!" rousing their attention, they perceived the boar coming full tilt towards them.

The correct manner of receiving the attack of a charging wild boar in those days, was to poise the weight of the body

backwards on the left leg, and slightly bending the right knee, firmly to stem the cutlass against it. The right hand grasped the hilt of the weapon, while the left, placed a little in front, gave to the steel the right direction for piercing the boar at its most vulnerable spot, between throat and shoulder blade. The cry of "Hus Sau!" flung like a taunt at the approaching animal, had the effect of yet further inciting its rage, and causing it to rush blindly on to destruction.

For a moment it appeared doubtful which of the two opponents the boar would select as object of its fury. An accident of dress decided the matter; for the last sunbeams, striking on the handsomer silver clasped belt of Count Pfeilhofen, seemed to mark him out as the most desirable foe.

Othmar had killed many boars before, probably some thirty-nine or thereabouts, as Bitterbalg had declared that morning, and, force of habit had rendered him a practised though never an eager sportsman. Neither was this boar a particularly formidable one to be tackled by any able-bodied man. But Othmar was strangely nervous and uncertain to-day, and his mind still all in a whirl with the agitation of the confession which had all but left his lips. As a drowning man is supposed to see his whole past life unrolled before him in one single minute, so many wild fancies had time to shoot through Count Pfeilhofen's brain during those few seconds when the charging boar was coming towards him. What was that nonsense old Bitterbalg had prated that morning about the fortieth boar? And what had he done with the lobster-claw necklace his attendant had insisted on forcing upon him? He thought he remembered having left it lying on the table in the hunting chamber. That was because Luitgard had been there, and her sudden appeal had made him forget everything else. Then before his eyes there rose up the vision of another hunting scene eighteen years ago, when, under the influence of danger, he had breathed a vow, only to break it again. Had he kept that vow he had never known the remorse and shame he had lived to endure. Luitgard would not have been broken-hearted, because Luitgard would not have existed; and

the quiet cloister cell that should have been his lot, how much more attractive did it now look retrospectively than this weary world, full of nameless agitations, qualms of conscience, and charging wild boars.

Did Othmar's hand tremble at the decisive moment, or was he startled just then by the piercing yell of a wounded hound rising up from the depths of the forest? Was it the reflection of the blood-red sunset glaring full in his eyes which caused him to miscalculate his aim, giving to the point of the knife a wrong direction? Or possibly it was because the boar at the last moment unexpectedly lowered its head.

The blade, instead of entering the animal's throat, struck full against the lower tusk, and was shivered in two. In the next moment man and boar were rolling together in the snow, in confused and struggling proximity.

Then suddenly from behind a tree there sprang forth the lithe, youthful figure of a young man with straight, Grecian features and dark glowing eyes, who, kneeling down upon the prostrate boar, thrust a long hunting knife deep up to the hilt behind the shoulder blade. A few more convulsive struggles, and the animal lay still, to rise no more.

Count Pfeilhofen too lay still with his face turned upwards towards the sunset sky, and from his throat there issued a bright red stream of blood, dyeing the snow around him.

Was he likewise to rise no more?

CHAPTER XXI

A BOAR ANIMÉ ARMED AND TUSKED

WULFHILD, who had given up the hunting party for the sake of watching Luitgard, found herself sorely disappointed by the result. Luitgard never attempted to leave the house, for this was not one of the days fixed for a meeting at the Herons' Tower. It had been agreed with Delius that they must wait until the snow was sufficiently trodden down to avoid detection by their footprints, and, until that could be, their intercourse consisted in the exchange of notes let down by means of a string from Luitgard's window after dark. Last night he had informed her that he would probably be away in the forest all day, watching the chase from afar. There was therefore absolutely nothing to repay Wulfhild for the pleasure she had lost, nor any clue to explain the unwonted cheerfulness in Luitgard's manner. Fifty times that day did she loudly lament having stayed at home and missed the opportunity of perhaps killing a stag or boar with her hunting knife.

"Wulfhild," said Luitgard, shuddering, "do you mean seriously to say that you can find any pleasure in killing a poor helpless animal?"

"Of course I do," returned Wulfhild promptly, as she tenderly fingered the little jewelled dagger which hung at her belt. "Many a time already have I plunged this sweet little knife up to its hilt in the throat of a stag or roedeer. You cannot think what an exhilarating sensation it is."

"Indeed I cannot," returned Luitgard. "It must be horrible!"

"When I am killing a deer," continued Wulfhild composedly, "I like to imagine that it is not an animal at all, but a living person who has been my enemy—a man who has betrayed me, or a woman who has stolen my lover. That gives zest and reality to the action. Do you understand me, Luitgard?"

"Wulfhild!" cried Luitgard, more horrified than she could express, "could you really kill a person, even if they had wronged you? Can you talk of such a thing being pleasure?"

"Pleasure? why, it would be rapture to thrust this knife into the heart of a rival or a traitor!" cried Wulfhild, her eyes sparkling with fierce delight and holding up the weapon before Luitgard's eyes. "Feel how sharp it is, Luitgard, and see how brightly it shines! And think how lovely it would look all covered with shining drops as red as the stones on the hilt!"

"Put it away," said Luitgard, hiding her eyes. "It makes me sick to look at it."

As the day wore on to its close, preparations were made to welcome home the returning hunters, and on such occasions it was customary to kindle a large bonfire in the centre of the quadrangle whereby to inspect the quarry. Wulfhild found a congenial occupation in assisting to pile up faggots on the burning pile, and in listening to the panting growl of the flames as they seized upon the combustible material. She had just snatched a glowing firebrand from the flames, and was holding it aloft like a fiery sceptre, when into the courtyard there rushed the little herald—panting, breathless, dishevelled, and incoherent. He flung himself down on to a faggot-bundle and covered his face with both hands.

"What has happened? Is anyone pursuing you?" asked Wulfhild, seeing that he did nothing but gasp and groan.

"Tout est perdu fors l'honneur," he moaned, rocking his body to and fro as though in mortal pain.

"Speak! I command you!" exclaimed Wulfhild, shaking her fiery sceptre till it rained down a shower of living sparks almost on to the head of the agitated little hunchback.

After a few more gasps he began—

"The chase was already concluded, and we were on our homeward way, ambulant," he interpolated, by way of explanation. "The Marchese Frecciaccorte, myself, and—and the count,"—the last word came out with a gulp,—“when, reaching the top of a mount, I espied before me, upon a field argent, two boars proper combatant, armed and tusked."

"What did you see?" asked Luitgard, to whom this language was somewhat obscure; but Wulfhild, better acquainted with her singular admirer's idiosyncrasies, said shortly, "He saw two boars fighting on the snow. Go on, and speak plain German if you can."

"I will try," said Christoph Dorndreher humbly. "Some female boars with their marcassins—grices, I mean—were lodged on the ground, but jessant at the first alarm of our presence, were quickly effaced. The alants—hounds, I would say—gave chase to the larger boar, which disappeared courant into the forest. The second boar, which had meanwhile been standing gardant, now turned round and came affronté towards us."

"Affronté?" repeated Wulfhild, with a point of interrogation.

"At gaze—full face," explained the narrator, grasping about wildly for an unheraldic definition. "His eyes were glowing like fiery coals, and were it not an improper expression with regard to a boar, I should describe him as incensed; but animé he verily was. Seeing him advance, both gentlemen drew their cutlasses and prepared to receive him."

"And where were you? Why did you not draw your knife as well?"

"I—I," stammered the little man, rather shamefacedly, but not daring to prevaricate under Wulfhild's stern glance, "seeing an oak with forky branches within easy reach, betook myself on to it, and there awaited the issue; *Cavendo tutus* being the motto which invariably regulates my conduct in such contingencies. What could I have availed below? The sight alone was sufficiently terrible, and as the boar had nearly reached Count Pfeilhofen, involuntarily I closed my

eyes. The sound of a sharp crack caused me to open them again, and then I saw that his knife was rompu—fractured, I would say—and that not only the boar, but also Count Pfeilhofen were lying renversé."

"My father had fallen?" asked Luitgard anxiously. "And then?"

"And then?" repeated Wulfhild imperiously.

"And then," he continued, "from out the bushes there suddenly appeared salient a young stranger, who plunged his dagger in the monster's throat, till it was imbrued up to the hilt."

"What was he like?" asked both girls in a breath.

"He was a youth of exceeding beauty, as far as I could discern from above, crined sable and with regular features."

"How brave! how gallant!" exclaimed Wulfhild, with sparkling eyes; and had she but chanced to glance at Luitgard, she would have seen that, strangely enough, her eyes too were sparkling.

"Then the boar was dead?" she asked, after a pause.

"Yes—the—boar was dead," said the hunchback, with unaccountable hesitation. Then dashing his hand over his eyes, he hurriedly exclaimed, "Oh, ladies, it was a fearful sight. The whole field argent round them semé gules; sanguine, I might say it was."

"But my father?" asked Luitgard, whose mind had meanwhile recovered from surprise of a different nature. "Was he hurt? Oh, say he was not wounded?" she continued, alarmed by the persistent silence which met her questions.

"Would to God I could say he was not! But alas! he was vulned, and deeply too. Never, never shall I forget that sight! The noble count renversé on the snow; the field no longer argent but sanguine; the whole scene irradiated by the crimson sunset. Naught but blood everywhere. Oh, gules! gules! gules!" And with a gesture of frenzied despair, he threw up his arms over his head.

Wulfhild now flung away her firebrand sceptre and stepped to Dorndreher's side.

"Where is the count? Where is the marchese?" she inquired, shaking his arm roughly. "Why have you returned alone?"

"Hush!" said the little man, trembling all over. "They are bringing him. Do you not hear?" And as he spoke, the sound of approaching hunting horns fell on their listening ears; but the music played was not a joyous fanfare such as denotes the return of successful hunters; sad and wailing as the notes of a dirge, it struck home with a sense of vague dismay to Luitgard's heart. The two girls stood silent, not daring to put another question, their eyes fixed on the gateway, which presently was darkened by a train of advancing figures.

The next few minutes were little more distinct than a delirious nightmare to Luitgard, scarce aware of what was happening around her. The court was full of hounds and huntsmen fitfully illumined by the dancing flames, which capriciously threw out some details in strongest relief, while others were enveloped in deepest shadow. Bearers approached carrying on their shoulders pine-branch litters, whereon reposed the outstretched carcasses of bristling boars, more terrible to look at dead than living, as the torchlight glanced off their cruel white tusks and gore-dripping heads. And yonder was yet another of these hastily constructed biers, but so closely enveloped in shade that Luitgard could not discern what species of quarry rested thereon.

She asked after her father, and when he was coming? and silence met her questions. Then someone, she knew not who,—perhaps it was the marchese,—took her by the hand, and told her the truth, in gentle, compassionate words. Her father was never coming back again, never, never more; and all that remained of him rested on that shrouded bier. His windpipe had been torn open by the boar's sharp tusks as they rolled together on the ground, and there he had bled to death in the snow, without ever recovering speech.

CHAPTER XXII

A FRIENDLY ARRANGEMENT

WITH Count Pfeilhofen's death all immediate prospect of Luitgard's marriage had of course ceased, and in the midst of her deep and genuine sorrow for the father she had lost, there was a latent sense of relief at this respite. But it was only a respite after all, for the situation remained virtually unchanged—nay, rather it was yet more hopeless than it had previously been, for she had now lost the only person who could have assisted her in breaking these hateful fetters.

There were periods, especially when the marchese's duties recalled him to the capital, when Luitgard almost lost sight of her engagement, and could cheat herself into the belief that she was free. But these periods became rarer and more fleeting, and with the approach of spring she began to realise that her prison walls were gradually closing in around her, and this time without hope of escape.

"There is no reason for further delay," the countess had said to her daughter one bright April day, when the sun was shining with such unusual power and intensity as almost to convey the illusion that Nature had thought fit to skip a whole season, and had leapt at one bound from deepest winter into broiling midsummer. "You are now eighteen years old, and it is high time that the position towards your cousin should be regularised in the eyes of the world, and that Pfeilhofen should receive a master. In May it will be six months since your father's death, and the ceremony can take place as soon as the date is passed. The wedding will be quite quiet, of course,

in view of the circumstances. Do you understand me, Luitgard ?”

And Luitgard, incapable of attempting opposition, had merely unclosed her lips to say—

“Yes, mother, I understand,” and had then silently left the room.

As Luitgard passed down the long vaulted corridor that ran round the interior of the quadrangle, she caught sight of the Marchese Frecciacorte at the opposite end with his back turned towards her. It would have been easy to avoid him as she had so often done of late, for her light footstep had been unheard, and she would only have required to turn back and regain her room by another passage. But Luitgard did not attempt to do so ; scarcely yet aware of her own intention, she swiftly walked down the corridor and laid her hand upon her cousin’s arm.

A joyful flush had come into his eyes at this unexpected accostment, and eagerly he seized upon the little hand and raised it to his lips ; but she withdrew it impatiently, saying in a hard, dry voice—

“Come out into the park with me. I must speak to you at once alone.”

But when, a few minutes later, she found herself seated with her cousin upon one of the old benches in the chestnut alley, Luitgard did not find it so easy to begin speaking. She looked at him longer and more earnestly than she had ever done before, as though trying to divine what sort of man he was, and to read her fate in his eyes ; but still she did not open her lips.

“You desired to speak to me, my fair cousin ?” said Gastone at last, slightly puzzled by her manner and expression. “Is there anything that I can do ? You know that your desires are my orders.”

Then suddenly taking courage, without any preamble she began—

“You are a good man—my father said so on that very last morning before he went away. He told me that you

would not refuse, that you would not compel me to be miserable."

"Miserable! Good God, Luitgard! Do you not know that I ask no other favour but to be permitted to devote my life to your happiness? that your slightest wish is law to me, and that there is nothing, nothing that is in my power to grant, which shall ever be denied to you? If you choose to live in the country, then I am ready to swear never to cross the gates of Castle Pfeilhofen. If you prefer a town life, then the Residenz shall be my only paradise. If you desire to travel and see foreign lands, I am ready to lead the life of a wandering Arab, without fixed home—wherever you are will be heaven for me. You have but to name your wish, and it is granted beforehand."

"Even if I ask you to go away?" said Luitgard, rather unsteadily. Somehow she had not thought that it would be so hard to formulate her request. In theory it had seemed quite an easy thing to do, but as she now gazed at his pale, high-bred face, all transfixed with unmistakable emotion, she became aware of an obstacle which had not entered into her calculations.

The marchese had not yet grasped her meaning.

"To go away! But why should I go away before our marriage?" he answered, in bewilderment. "You know that your mother desires it to take place before the end of May."

"But it cannot take place in May!" exclaimed Luitgard desperately. "That is why I am obliged to ask you to help me, for I dare not speak to my mother."

"And it is for this that you want my assistance? You want me to put off our marriage?"

Luitgard merely nodded silently.

"You do not know what you are asking, Luitgard. Can you seriously expect me by my own act to defer my happiness? It is your innocence and unconsciousness that makes you cruel, but it is cruelty all the same."

"I know," said Luitgard, below her breath. "I know—but—but—I cannot help it."

There was a long pause before he spoke again. His voice was husky, and the words came out with some apparent difficulty.

"And for how long shall I have to wait, Luitgard? Will it be for weeks or months?"

"Oh, do not ask me, for pity's sake!" cried Luitgard, impulsively covering her face with both hands. "Indeed, indeed I can give you no other answer. I only know that I cannot now become your wife—it is quite, quite impossible!"

The marchese had grown very pale, but he spoke with a gentle dignity that bore in it no trace of resentment.

"You mean that you cannot return my affection. But I have never deceived myself as to that, for I know that it is impossible. You are too exquisitely young and fair to be able to love a world-worn man whom care and misfortune have rendered older yet than his years. All that I had ventured to hope for was that you would suffer me to love you, and that perhaps in time the strength of my affection would have evoked some slight response, some spark of sympathy in your own heart."

Luitgard bowed her head with an almost guilty feeling. It was impossible for her to give this man even a shadow of that hope for which he pleaded so humbly, and yet, unbeknown to herself, she could not help feeling strangely touched and disturbed by his evident emotion.

"I am not worthy to be your wife, my cousin," she said, almost in a whisper. "Such love as yours deserves to be fully returned, and it is my—my misfortune that I am unable to do so. Why do you waste your thoughts on me? There are surely many other women who would feel justly honoured by your affection?"

"It is precisely because I have seen other women that I love you, and you alone. I would rather be tolerated by you than worshipped by any other. I only ask for permission to love you; is that also too much to expect?" he concluded wistfully.

But Luitgard's tears, now dropping fast, rendered her reply

unintelligible; and the sight of her distress so affected the marchese as to cause him abruptly to exchange the part of lover for that of comforter. He was ready to do anything, even to sacrificing his dearest hopes, in order to relieve her grief. He would shield her against that terrible mother of whom she was so afraid; would take upon himself the whole odium of the rupture. She might count upon him implicitly. He would be her friend, her champion, her defender, since the privilege of being her husband was denied to him.

And Luitgard, accepting these almost sublime sacrifices with the thoughtless egotism of youth, presently dried her tears and smiled up at Gastone with eyes brimful of gratitude. It was surprising how much more affectionately disposed she felt towards her cousin, now that she was not going to be forced to marry him. How good, how noble, how delicate-minded he was! And how lucky for her to have found such a trusty friend to confide in and lean upon! Arm in arm they returned to the castle, in close and earnest conversation; but just as they were passing over the little drawbridge that spanned the moat, Luitgard withdrew her hand abruptly and began to pull off her glove.

"What is it?" asked Gastone, standing still in surprise. "Have you hurt your hand?"

"It is only that I had forgotten about the ring," stammered Luitgard. "Of course I cannot keep it any longer since you have generously released me from my promise." And she had already half withdrawn it from her finger, when he stopped her by saying very earnestly—

"I will not take it back, my cousin. You must do me the favour to keep it merely as a friendly remembrance of one who, in spite of all, will remain your slave for life. And should there ever come a day when you change your mind," he went on, with a slight tremor in his voice, "when you think better of your present resolution, and are willing to confide your future life to my keeping, then you need only send me back the ring. I shall know what it means, and that day will be the happiest in my life."

"Do not deceive yourself, my cousin. The day you speak of will never come," said Luitgard, with a fresh but transient pang of remorse. "It were cruel of me to let you believe it. I have told you why I cannot become your wife. Of course, if you had chosen to claim my promise I would have submitted; for it was never yet said that a daughter of the Pfeilhofens broke her given word."

"You are safe from me," returned Gastone gravely, "and I would not take you but of your own free will. As long as the ring remains in your keeping I shall never obtrude my affection upon you. But, if ever I see it again, then I shall know without any words that I have your permission to come and claim you as my bride."

"Very well," said Luitgard, bowing gravely. "Let it be as you wish, my cousin. I shall keep your ring in grateful remembrance of your kindness to me to-day.—Oh, Wulfhild! what a fright you gave me! And why are you hiding here?" she broke off suddenly, as Wulfhild, looking rather flushed and disturbed, unexpectedly emerged from behind a clump of laurels that overhung the edge of the dried-up moat.

"Why were you frightened?" returned Wulfhild promptly and with assumed playfulness. "It is only people with a bad conscience that are afraid. And why should I be hiding, pray? What an absurd idea! I was only feeding the sparrows down there in the moat; there are such dozens of them, and it is so amusing to watch them squabbling and fighting for the crumbs. But engaged couples are proverbially blind and deaf, and you two up here were so absorbed in your interesting conversation that of course you never perceived me!"

CHAPTER XXIII

FASCINATION

THROUGHOUT the long, dreary winter months, the Herons' Tower had stood deserted, and Delius himself had paid but rare and fitful visits to Castle Pfeilhofen ; for since the unexpected part he had played in killing the boar that had been the cause of Othmar's death, he had deemed it prudent to vanish for a time from the neighbourhood. Had it not been for the fact of Wulfhild's presence, this incident would have afforded a valid excuse for introducing himself into Castle Pfeilhofen and reaping the benefit of his apparently heroic action —although, in truth, it had been carefully calculated, and almost unattended by danger, the boar being virtually helpless and unable to move at the moment when Delius had plunged the hunting knife into its throat. But Wulfhild was a dangerous stumbling-block in his path, and Delius knew full well that he never could have hoped to conceal his secret from her jealously vigilant eyes.

But now that spring had come round again, the weekly meetings were to be resumed, and a note skilfully conveyed to her bedroom window had informed Luitgard that her lover had returned, and would be waiting for her on the morrow by the Herons' Tower. It was now a fortnight since the marchese had taken his departure, feigning an unexpected summons to the capital, and in a letter subsequently addressed to Hedwig he had obscurely alluded to obstacles that would hinder his return to Castle Pfeilhofen at present. A prey to vague uneasiness, Hedwig in vain racked her brain for an explanation of Gastone's behaviour, and Wulfhild, who perhaps knew more,

kept silence, deeming that the time to speak had not yet come. But during the days that followed she watched Luitgard incessantly, with the untiring vigilance of a spider watching the fly just outside its net, and which only a jealous woman can bring to bear upon another in whom she has begun to suspect a rival.

It was, however, all unconscious of having been watched or followed, that Luitgard, at the appointed hour, gained the steps leading up to the Herons' Tower. Here she paused for a moment, startled by an unusual sound that met her ears. It was a low, monotonous melody, played upon some flute-like instrument, soft and caressing as southern breezes sighing through orange groves. One step farther, and Luitgard could see the musician. It was Delius, who, standing just within the tower, was holding a long, slender Pandean pipe to his lips. His profile only was visible, for his eyes, turned away, were fixed apparently upon something within the room, towards which the music was directed, for his lithe, graceful figure swayed to and fro as though to emphasize certain notes and passages.

How sweet, how seductive was this music! Luitgard felt as though she could have stood here listening for hours. But who could be those other listeners inside the tower? Rousing herself with a slight effort, Luitgard walked up the steps and stood beside Delius, shuddering at the sight that met her eyes.

It was late in the afternoon, and the usually gloomy room was bathed in crimson light; for several more of the old fir trees had fallen in last winter's storms, making a wide gap in the dusky screen, through which the long-banished sunbeams could now freely enter at certain hours of the day. The rotten oaken flooring was brighter than any beeswax polish could have made it, and the murky stain which disfigured some of the boards glowed vividly red, as though Wilibald's blood were but freshly shed upon them. And right in the centre of the illumined room two weird reptiles, with bright, speckled bodies, and small, fiery eyes, crawled and writhed at the musician's feet, held there spellbound and fascinated by the notes of his instrument. And as Luitgard stood and watched in frozen

horror, from out between two large folio volumes on the bookshelves there crept yet another serpent, larger and fuller than the other two, slowly unwinding its hideous coils until it too had joined its companions, and, like them, was wambling and swaying helplessly, its sharp fanged teeth and venomously darting tongue rendered powerless by the imperious eye of an acknowledged master.

This, then, was the secret of the Herons' Tower, which had puzzled Luitgard since earliest childhood; although only by degrees, as she had time to connect seemingly disjointed hints and indications, the whole story became clear to her mind!

It was the Turkish lady Zelmira, Wilibald's first wife, who, morbidly fond of every species of abnormal animal that reminded her of her native land, had cherished a pair of tame serpents in the tower. Extended upon the couch that bore her name, she used to spend hours toying with these loathsome playthings, undeterred by the disgusted remonstrances of her attendants. Then, when Zelmira died, the tower was shut up for a time, and when it was again reopened, after an interval of some years, it was found that meanwhile the serpents had bred and multiplied, overrunning the whole lower room, where they had found congenial hiding-places behind the long rows of piled-up folio volumes, and in the holes beneath the broken floor. Many ineffectual attempts were made to exterminate these reptiles, whose numbers would doubtless have been yet greater but for the near vicinity of the herons, that watched the tower with sharp, mistrustful eyes, to swoop down mercilessly upon any young deluded snake, which, allured by the summer warmth, had crept out to sun itself awhile, as well as for the owls, weasels, and polecats that long since had discovered a happy hunting-ground within the grim old building.

Frustrated in all his endeavours to dislodge these unwelcome guests, Wilibald had finally closed up the Herons' Tower, and so it had remained for well-nigh half a century, until Hedwig, in the first year of her marriage, had given orders to have it reopened, and had adopted the lower apartment as her own private sitting-room. It was here that she loved to

retire in order to escape the wearisome infliction of Othmar's loving assiduities. Alone with her thoughts, she would spend long hours in musing over her own lost love, and endeavouring to find consolation in the thought of the son and heir she was soon to give to the Pfeilhofen name. All thought of the venomous reptiles supposed to haunt these precincts had faded away, regarded probably as a baseless legend, until the day when Hedwig received the terrible shock that was to annihilate her hopes and blight the rest of her life. It had been in April, just two months before the expected term of her deliverance, a warm, sunny day, when, just as now, the air had been redolent with the perfume of countless violets. Hedwig, alone on the little island, had stooped down to pluck a tuft of the dewy flowers that gleamed so temptingly between the parted grass blades ; but instead of encountering firm, juicy stalks, her unsuspecting fingers had closed round something cold and moist, that coiled and wriggled in her grasp, twisting itself up her bare, unprotected arm with lightning-like rapidity. Then, as Hedwig had realised that it was a serpent she held between her fingers, a wave of supreme horror had swept over her senses, and she had fallen swooning to the ground. Here she was discovered by her distracted husband, who, raising her up in his arms, carried her inside the tower and laid her down upon Zelmira's couch until consciousness should have returned. But it soon became evident that she could not be moved to the castle, for the effects of the shock were not confined to a mere passing fright, and early upon the following morning Hedwig had given birth to twin children, of whom the boy had survived but a few hours.

Delius had taken no notice of Luitgard's presence save by raising a finger to enjoin silence ; then, still continuing to play, he began to walk slowly backwards, his eyes always steadily fixed upon the listening serpents, which followed him mechanically, as though plunged in a trance. When he had reached Zelmira's couch, Delius sat down deliberately and ceased playing. Then, stretching out his arm, he laid hold of

the snakes one after the other, coiling their numb, unresisting bodies round his throat and wrists, where they hung limp and lifeless, like gruesome glistening ornaments.

Adorned in this strange fashion, he now looked across at Luitgard, as though challenging admiration ; but there was no responding smile upon her lips as she stood, pale and trembling, at the entrance, her arm feebly clutching the doorpost to keep herself from falling.

Delius gave a low, gurgling laugh.

"You are frightened?" he said softly, yet with scarcely veiled contempt, "of these stupid, creeping reptiles. But do you not see that I am their master?—that they dare not disobey? They are afraid of me, and that is good. It is only fear that gives power. See, they are quite harmless, just now ; you can touch them with impunity. You will not?" as Luitgard drew back yet further in shrinking repulsion. "Very well ; to please you I shall put away my playthings for to-day. You can go home, my pets, and do not come back until I call you again."

So saying, Delius had swiftly unwound the stupefied snakes from off his neck and arms, and tossed them back lightly into a dark corner behind the book-shelves.

But it was long before Luitgard regained her composure ; she could not be induced to re-enter the room, but insisted on sitting down upon the stone steps outside.

"Yes, I guessed it long ago from certain signs and indications," said Delius presently, replying to a question. "That is why I brought my flageolet to-day, in order to see whether I could lure them from their hiding-places."

"But how could you know that they would come—that they would obey you?"

"Serpents always obey me. I have never once failed in the trick." But, seeing her look of surprise, he added quickly, "Over there in my own country there are many snakes, and I learned how to subdue them when I was yet a boy. They are quite old friends, I assure you, and we always perfectly understand each other." Then, as though suddenly desirous

of changing the conversation, he abruptly plunged into a whole string of somewhat irrelevant questions. What was going on at the castle? Was her companion Wulfhild still there? And her so-called bridegroom, the marchese, where was he?

When Luitgard had given the substance of all that had taken place within the last fortnight—of her appeal to Gastone and his abrupt departure—Delius drew his straight Grecian brows together in a thoughtful frown, and was silent for some moments.

"Yes, that is good," he said presently. "This gives us a reprieve; but it will not be for long, and we must act in the meantime before the tide turns again. Tell me, Luitgard, are you able to take a great resolution?"

"What is it?" she asked, trembling a little.

"You must leave your home—say farewell to Pfeilhofen, and come away alone with me."

"But my mother! You do not know her. She will never consent!"

"We shall not ask her. After you have disappeared, they will raise a great hue and cry, of course; but that need not harm us."

"You want me to run away—to leave my home like a guilty creature that has committed some shameful deed?"

"It is our only chance, and it will be but for a time. When your mother knows what has happened she will have no choice but to consent to our union. She cannot injure you permanently, I suppose, since you are undoubtedly your father's heiress?"

"I suppose so," said Luitgard indifferently.

"It will take me fully ten days to make the necessary preparations," said Delius, pursuing his train of thought. "I must contrive to raise sufficient money to cover the first few weeks after our flight. We need not go very far. I know of a secure refuge where I have lived before—where no one can recognise or suspect us."

"Delius!" cried Luitgard, beginning to tremble again, "I cannot do it! Do not ask such a dreadful thing of me. No

Pfeilhofen maiden has yet dishonoured her name. Ask anything else but only not this one thing."

"But this happens to be the only thing which I care to ask," returned Delius, with quiet decision. "Luita, I give you exactly three days to make up your mind whether you choose to come with me or lose me for ever. On Thursday after nightfall I shall wait below your window to fetch your answer."

And, as though to signify that he desired no further discussion of the subject, Delius drew out the flageolet again and recommenced playing the same soft, insinuating melody as before.

"Why do you do that, Delius?" exclaimed Luitgard, shuddering nervously. "Did you not promise that you would not call back those dreadful creatures?"

"I am not playing for the serpents now," said Delius, with a peculiar smile. "Listen, Luita. I am going to play you a Greek love song, one of the melodies I learned over there in my own country. You do not know how to love up here in the cold north; but yonder, in my bright island, the very atmosphere is fraught with love. Man and beast, flower and insect, all are singing the same hymn and preaching the same gospel—that the laws of love alone deserve to be regarded. Compared to the supreme bond that unites two warm, living hearts, all other social rules and conventions are but as pale shadows, sorry fictions, devoid of sense and meaning."

He had drawn her down to his side on the stone steps, and, raising the instrument to his lips, began to play again, his head slightly inclined, and his unswerving eyes fixed full upon her own.

What was it that Delius played to Luitgard on this balmy spring evening, as the crimson sun was sinking fast behind the tree-tops, and the sentinel herons in the branches aloft stood guard with watchful tenderness over their patiently brooding mates? Some charmed melody assuredly it must have been, for as Luitgard listened, a sort of voluptuous languor, a feeling of helpless irresponsibility, infinitely sweet and delicious, crept

over her senses. She had lost all consciousness of her own individuality, for, as her eyes hung fascinated upon his, it seemed to Luitgard as though she were floating through endless space alone with Delius, while that delirious love-call, alternately soft and pleading as the wild pigeon's note, or loud and imperious as the eagle's cry, rang incessantly in her spell-bound ear.

As at last her head sank helplessly upon her lover's shoulder, Delius ceased playing and gazed down at his semi-unconscious companion with an air of masterful possession. He knew now that his victory was gained, and that Luitgard's answer on Thursday night could only be an unconditional surrender.

CHAPTER XXIV

SALE AND BARTER

WULFHILD, concealed behind one of the largest pine stems across the pool, had been witness of the foregoing scene. At this distance she was of course unable to follow the conversation very consecutively, but the isolated words that came floating over the water were more than enough to explain a scene sufficiently eloquent by itself; and when, the last crimson streaks of light having died away in the west, Delius and Luitgard parted after a long, clinging embrace, that caused Wulfhild savagely to clench her teeth, she had caught his parting phrase quite distinctly—

“You are frightened to-day, my Luita, but you will change your mind before Thursday, when I shall come to fetch your answer.”

And when Thursday came round, long before the appointed hour, Wulfhild, wrapped in a dark mantle that effectually shrouded her from observation, was crouched in the moat beneath Luitgard’s window; and after waiting for over an hour, her patience was rewarded by seeing a second figure steal down the bank, so close to where she was concealed that his sleeve almost brushed against her. Then a window above was heard cautiously to open, and a slip of white paper attached to a string was slowly let down the ivied wall. As it came within reach, it required all Wulfhild’s self-control to keep her from springing forward and seizing upon the missive as a cat pounces upon a mouse; but the very intensity of her feelings taught her self-control, so she remained motionless, and gave no sign.

Delius, on receiving the note, had moved away a little to a spot where a ray of moonlight, piercing through the bushes, enabled him to read its contents. Then, taking out another paper from his pocket, he rapidly scrawled a few pencil lines upon it and proceeded to attach it to the loosely dangling string. He had scarcely concluded this act when an unusual sound caused him to start apprehensively. Not the faintest breeze was stirring to-night, but to his sensitive ear it had seemed as though surely the large white lilac bush alongside had rustled ever so faintly. Perhaps one of the staghounds was abroad, and might betray his presence; so, without giving himself time to watch the arrival of his ascending return note, Delius, in a couple of lithe bounds, reached the top of the moat and was swallowed up in shadow.

But Wulfhild was quick to see her opportunity. In the next moment she had caught hold of the string and was pulling it towards her. The knot that secured the note was firmly tied, but her sharp teeth, applied with fierce energy, soon disposed of this slight obstacle. A wild light of triumph shone in her eyes, and she barely refrained from a shout of victory as she hid the paper in her bosom. With her left hand she still grasped the dangling cord, and it needed a gentle tug from above to recall her to the practical urgencies of the situation. Luitgard would of course be expecting an answer, and if the string came back empty and broken, then she might take alarm and suspect false play. What was she to do in this unforeseen emergency?

Perhaps it was the sweet, heavy perfume of the white lilacs alongside that suggested an easy solution to the enigma, for presently Wulfhild had plucked one of the large juicy clusters and had tied it on securely; and as she now stood and watched the ascending white flower, looming through the darkness like an animated star, she smiled grimly to herself as she pictured the scene that would probably ensue.

"Of course she will take this to be his only answer, and will be quite satisfied. And she will kiss it over and over again, believing his lips to have touched it; and then she will

put it under her pillow, and dream of him all night. And to think that once I myself was just such a simpleton as she is now! But take care, Luitgard, the end is coming! Your fate has been decided to-night, and, unless I be greatly mistaken, you have looked your last upon Hippolyt's false fair face!"

At first with incredulity, then with growing consternation, the countess had listened to Wulfhild's disclosures next morning, and it was only when she actually held in her hands the note that was the answer to the letter her daughter had written, that full conviction came home to her mind. It contained but these few words:—

"Your sweet consent has made me the happiest of men. Meet me to-morrow at the Herons' Tower at the usual hour to arrange all details for our flight, which must take place without delay.
DELIUS."

"And who is this man with whom you say my daughter has clandestine meetings and exchanges letters in secret?" said Hedwig at last, drawing up her spare figure with icy pride.

"They call him Hippolyt and sometimes Phebus, but I do not know whether that is his real name, or if that too is a lie like all the rest. He was brought to Germany from the South by an old sculptor, a neighbour of my father's, who came across him as member of a troop of strolling players, a sort of circus, in which Hippolyt used to produce himself as snake charmer. Attracted by his faultless beauty, the sculptor first engaged him as model for a statue of Apollo killing the Python, upon which he was then engaged. Soon, however, he grew to love him as a son; for Marlin is a tender-hearted old man, who has lost his wife and has no children of his own. But Hippolyt is cruel and ungrateful to his benefactor, whom he sometimes deserts for months at a time, only returning home when driven back there by hunger or necessity. As long as he has a silver thaler in his pocket, he cares not if poor old Marlin is breaking his heart for him in solitude."

"A mountebank! a strolling player!" said Hedwig, in horrified accents. "That a Pfeilhofen, a daughter of mine, should so far demean herself!"

"And why not?" returned Wulfhild, with some heat. "Do you imagine Luitgard to be the only one who has been bewitched by his bold black eyes and Grecian profile? I tell you that no woman can resist him, for he is beautiful—beautiful as surely no living man was ever before! But she must be undeceived—must be saved before it is too late," continued Wulfhild, with an abrupt change of accent. "When she learns how false he is, how inconstant; when she knows that she has no right, no claim upon his love, then she will surely come to her senses, and no longer think of breaking her engagement."

The countess now eyed Wulfhild with a long, keen glance.

"You speak warmly, generously. Are you indeed so fond of Luitgard, so desperately anxious to save her from this adventurer?"

Before the direct gaze of those cold blue eyes Wulfhild dropped her own, murmuring in some confusion—

"Of course I wish to save her. Is it not natural that I should desire to do so? Surely the commonest friendship"—

"It is scarcely the commonest friendship that is making your eyes sparkle like diamonds, or that causes your voice to vibrate in that fashion," interrupted Hedwig drily. "No, Wulfhild, you cannot deceive me; and if you expect me to act at all in this matter—for, after all, I have only your word for all this—you must be perfectly frank, and tell me your motive."

"Very well," said Wulfhild, throwing back her head with proud resolution, as if in answer to a challenge, though a hot wave of colour was mounting up to the very roots of her coal-black hair. "You shall know the truth, since you ask it. It is because I too am one of the many unhappy women who have gone distracted for his sake; because I was the first; because he belongs to me, and to me alone; and

because I shall never relinquish my rights, or give him up to another woman."

"Even though you know him to be worthless? You said so just now."

"Even then," said Wulfhild firmly. "I would rather live in the meanest hovel with Hippolyt, to be daily beaten and ill-used by him, than set upon a golden throne in any other man's palace. What has love to do with individual merit or deserts? Surely you know it yourself, and cannot wonder at me. Wolfram von Winkelried was not what the world calls a good man, but he knew how to love, and I—am I not my father's daughter? Luitgard's pale face and her dreamy blue eyes have banished my image from his heart just now. But what does that matter? She does not know how to love as I do. My love is strong enough to win him back again, and to keep him; strong enough to recoil before no means in order to attain my end."

The mask once dropped, an understanding was quickly effected between the countess and Wulfhild, each recognising in the other an equally powerful motive for desiring to separate Luitgard from her clandestine lover. That this must be done without arousing suspicion in Luitgard's mind was the first necessary condition to the success of the scheme; for Hedwig knew enough of her daughter, rightly to surmise that any open opposition would only tend to bring out that stubborn tenacity that was a common characteristic of the Pfeilhofens. And Wulfhild, who knew the man with whom they had to deal, was able to advise as to which influence, arguments, and inducements it would be wise to bring to bear upon him.

Accordingly, on the following afternoon, Luitgard, in company of old Walpurga the housekeeper, was despatched in the carriage to visit Pater Ludolf upon some more or less fictitious errand connected with the distribution of alms to the parish poor on the occasion of the approaching marriage. Her absence was thus secured till evening, and Delius, coming to the Herons' Tower to keep his appointed tryst with Luitgard, was there unexpectedly confronted by Wulfhild's eyes flashing

scorn upon him, as, with voice strangled with emotion, she poured forth a passionate cataract of taunts, reproaches, and threats into his bewildered ears.

He had stood dumb at first, overwhelmed by the realisation of this unexpected catastrophe, and cursing the ill-luck which had caused his projects of love and ambition to be roughly shipwrecked almost within sight of port. But after having recognised his failure to be complete and irreparable, a touch of his former audacity presently came back, and he determined to put a bold face upon the disagreeable situation. He knew that the woman whose lips were uttering such harsh, violent words, loved him as deeply as her fair, pale rival had done, and he was not minded to stand meekly before her like a schoolboy receiving a scolding.

"If you have nothing more agreeable to say to me, then I shall take my leave of you as well as of Castle Pfeilhofen for ever. It was scarcely worth your while to come out here in the pouring rain merely to tell me this."

So saying, he had already turned on his heel and was preparing to go; but his words had a sudden sobering effect upon Wulfhild, who in her first burst of fury had almost lost sight of the chief object of her mission. Following him to the door, she laid her hand upon his arm with a conciliatory gesture.

"But I have something else to say, Hippolyt—something of great, of vital importance. "Countess Pfeilhofen, Luitgard's mother, desires to speak to you at once."

He stared at her for a moment in blank incredulity, then with a smothered oath roughly shook off her clinging arm.

"So you have betrayed me to her as well! May a thousand curses overtake you! And do you imagine that I am going to be fool enough to put my head into the lion's jaws, and willingly expose myself to a repetition of the moral sermon to which you have been treating me! No thank you, my precious Wulfhild! I am not going to be so obliging as to walk into the trap you have so ingeniously prepared for me!"

"It is no trap, Hippolyt," cried Wulfhild earnestly; "I am ready to swear it by my soul's salvation. Believe me that this

interview which the countess desires can only be for your advantage."

"Rubbish," retorted Delius sneeringly. "Am I to be simple enough to suppose that your haughty countess will relent, and give me her daughter and her blessing into the bargain?"

"Not that," said Wulfhild quickly. "Luitgard can never be yours, and it were folly ever to think of her again. But there might be other reasons, other advantages, resulting from the interview."

"What do you mean? I do not understand."

"Certain compensations perhaps—that is what I mean," returned Wulfhild significantly. "Only trust me, Hippolyt, and come with me. Believe me, you have nothing to fear and everything to gain by doing so."

Delius at last gave a sulkily consent, and ten minutes later found himself in the presence of the woman whose name Luitgard had never mentioned but in terms of shrinking awe. That was because she was only a weak, helpless girl, he told himself; but he was a man, and had no cause to fear any woman, and were she the highest in the land. Nevertheless, when he actually stood before her, with the gaze of those cold blue eyes, so like yet so unlike Luitgard's own, fixed upon him, Delius was conscious of feeling smaller and more insignificant than he had ever done before. He had probably never previously been brought in such close proximity to a real *grande dame*, in the truest acceptation of the word—a woman imbued to her finger-tips with the inborn and unconscious pride of twenty generations of blue-blooded ancestors; and instantaneously all his natural gifts of physical beauty and charm of manner, the audacity and self-confidence resulting from the knowledge of his power over women, seemed to fall away from him like the flimsy tinsel ornaments he had worn in former days as a strolling player, leaving him exposed in his true character of an obscure and nameless vagrant.

Neither did Countess Pfeilhofen make any pretence of

treating him as an equal. She addressed him coldly and haughtily, as might do a mistress giving orders to a menial, and by no word or gesture authorising him to be seated in her presence.

"You were about to run away with Countess Luitgard, my daughter," she said, in clear, measured tones. "And no doubt you deemed yourself very clever in having persuaded her to do so. It would have been a good stroke of fortune for a man in your—your—rather doubtful position to have secured the hand of a wealthy heiress."

"It was not her fortune. I loved Luita for herself, and my love was returned," said Delius, rousing himself to a show of self-assertion.

"As to love, we will not discuss that point," said Hedwig, with a slight wave of her delicate white hand. "My daughter, Countess Luitgard" (emphasizing the title distinctly), "is still a child, and does not know the meaning of the word. And as regards her fortune, you do well to say that this was not your object, for otherwise you would have been doomed to disappointment. Luitgard's fortune does not exist. She is absolutely penniless in the eye of the law."

"Impossible!" cried Delius, thrown off his guard by this unexpected disclosure. "Why, she told me herself! Did she not say her brother was dead, and that she was the last of the race? Surely she cannot have meant to deceive. . . ."

"She told you aright. My son, Count Kunibert Pfeilhofen, is dead," and Hedwig pointed to the portrait of the dead baby on the wall. "But all the same, Luitgard is penniless, though she does not know it herself. Pfeilhofen and all its lands belong to her cousin, the Marchese Frecciacorte, whom she is about to marry."

Hedwig knew that she was playing a dangerous game, but she was shrewd enough to guess that perfect frankness was here the wisest policy. Her bald, simple statement of the case carried conviction with it as no lengthy arguments could have done, and along with conviction came a rush of other conflicting thoughts and emotions, some of which were reflected

in his face. Despite the very real disappointment at having lost Luitgard, Delius was feeling not unlike a person who, having toiled and schemed in order to gain possession of a sack full of gold, discovers just in time that it was really empty.

Hedwig saw her advantage, and was quick to pursue it.

"Had you married my daughter, as you rashly intended, you would therefore not only have found yourself burdened with a penniless wife to support, but would likewise have laid yourself open to prosecution by law for having abducted a minor. Even now, if I chose, I could send you to prison."

"That is not true!" he exclaimed insolently. "You have no proof against me but Wulfhild's assertions. The words of a jealous woman, what are they worth?"

"But this is a sufficient proof," said Hedwig, drawing out the note which had been intercepted by Wulfhild on the previous evening and holding it up before his eyes. "You recognise it, of course? Yes, I thought so. And you see, therefore, how entirely in my power you are."

Then, as no answer came, Hedwig continued—

"You have in your possession my daughter's note to which this was the answer?"

"Yes," returned Delius sullenly. "I have got Luita's note."

"You will give it to me," said the countess, with quiet decision. "I cannot permit it to remain in your possession."

"Return it! Never while I live! If I have lost Luita through base treachery, at least I shall keep this last remembrance of her."

"I will give you a thousand thaler for that note," said Hedwig quietly, proceeding to unlock a mahogany desk that stood on the table beside her arm-chair.

A covetous flash had come into his eyes at mention of the money, but he would not surrender without at least a show of resistance.

"This note is infinitely precious to me," he said, taking a folded-up paper from his pocket and pressing it to his lips with a melodramatic gesture. But he was covertly watching Hedwig all the while.

"Then let us say two thousand," she returned, her short upper lip curling in undisguised contempt.

"Make it three, and I will consent, though it breaks my heart to do so."

"Very well, three let it be," returned Hedwig, beginning to count out the money upon the table.

While she was doing so Delius had time to reflect that he had perhaps bartered his advantages over cheaply, and that possibly, had he played his cards more carefully, yet greater profits might have accrued from the situation. It was only fair to himself, he felt, that he should be handsomely indemnified for his loss and disappointment.

"I have also got a lock of your daughter's hair," he remarked, with assumed carelessness, as Hedwig began to stuff the money into a small leather bag.

"How much do you want for it?" was her only reply.

"Two thousand more—five thousand thalers altogether. You surely would not value your daughter's hair lower than that?" he returned, with a sneer.

With ill-disguised covetousness his eyes hung upon the little bag containing the money, and he had already stretched out his hand towards it when Hedwig interposed—

"Not yet," she said, ringing a little silver hand-bell. "Not before you have written what I am going to dictate to you." "Bring pen and ink," she added, as Wulfhild entered the room, "and remain here as witness to this—this gentleman's signature."

A few minutes later the five thousand thalers had passed into Delius' possession, and in exchange Countess Pfeilhofen had received a lock of pale golden hair and a hastily scrawled pencil note in Luitgard's handwriting, along with another paper upon which the ink was still fresh and glistening.

It was only then, that some sense of tardy shame seemed to come home to the man who had thus shamelessly bartered his love-tokens for sordid gold.

"You will not tell her, Countess Luitgard, of this—this transaction?" he asked, with almost humble deprecation.

"Not unless you by any word or deed compel me to make use of this document. If you leave my daughter undisturbed to marry her cousin, she need never learn the truth."

It was with bowed head and averted eyes, feeling and looking like a beaten cur, that Delius slunk from the presence of the two women before whom his whole moral worthlessness had been laid bare.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MAIDEN'S LEAP

WHEN Delius so mysteriously disappeared towards the end of April, without a word or a sign to Luitgard, she had gone about for a time with white drawn face and scared eyes, wherein a nameless terror began to form and settle, as day after day passed by without bringing any answer to the riddle. Her mental agony was all the harder to bear from the constant strain of having to dissemble her secret, and this effort it was that was threatening to undermine her health and unhinge her brain. Her resemblance to the hapless Leonora was remarkable at this time, and it was impossible to look at her without feeling compassion for such a combination of youth, beauty, and misery.

But the two women who watched her sufferings felt neither compassion nor remorse; and it was only when Luitgard at last fell seriously ill that her mother took alarm and began to ask herself whether the torture inflicted had not been beyond the victim's powers of endurance.

The physician called in pronounced it to be a nervous fever, and for many weeks Luitgard was confined to bed, plunged in an exhausted stupor by daytime, and at night racked by delirious visions, as incessantly she called upon Delius, and implored him to chase away the serpents that were threatening to part them.

It was Wulfhild who nursed Luitgard with devoted assiduity, sleeping on the floor beside her, always ready to spring up at the patient's slightest word or movement. But her face grew hard and set whenever the name of Delius escaped those hot

feverish lips, and sometimes she would pause in the act of measuring out the healing medicine prescribed by the doctor as the thought shot through her mind—

“What if Luitgard were not to recover? Then she could never again come between me and Hippolyt.”

But these were only passing thoughts, and in the next moment Wulfhild would be kneeling by the bedside in a sudden revulsion of feeling, passionately kissing the pale hand that lay limp and lifeless on the counterpane, and smoothing the sufferer's pillows with infinite tenderness; for although in imagination Wulfhild had innumerable times slain the rival who had stolen her lover's heart, in reality she would have been incapable of harming a single hair of her head. For she loved Luitgard in her own fierce, reckless fashion; and though she had not hesitated to do that which had destroyed her friend's happiness, yet she was ready to spend her life in ministering to that broken heart.

Luitgard had fallen ill in May, and September had come round ere she was able to leave her room, and, leaning upon Wulfhild's arm, crawl as far as the old stone bench in the chestnut alley, where she had sat with Gastone Frecciacorte on that day when she had thrown herself upon his mercy and implored him to release her from the engagement. The horse-chestnut buds had been tender and juicy then, their glistening petals just coyly parted to disclose the delicately curled-up green leaves within, and Luitgard's heart had been full of tremulous hopes and delicious yearnings. Now the horse-chestnut leaves were long past their prime; seared and yellow they hung upon the branches, as limp, as lifeless as the blighted hopes within her heart.

Luitgard's engagement had not been openly alluded to during the past months, although tacitly it was assumed to be still existing, since it never had been directly cancelled. Gastone Frecciacorte had not revisited Castle Pfeilhofen since his abrupt departure in April, but Hedwig had given him constant news of Luitgard's illness and of her gradual recovery. These missives were mostly laconically expressed,

merely a few words to report upon the patient's condition; but one day in September the post had brought something else, a packet carefully tied up and sealed, but addressed in a curiously cramped and obviously disguised handwriting.

What could it be? wondered Gastone, as he proceeded to break the seals. It felt hard to the touch, as if something dense and inflexible were hidden away between the paper folds. No suspicion of the truth dawned upon his mind until, the last wrapping being removed, the marchese stared down upon his own ruby ring—that ring which Luitgard was only to send back if she freely consented to become his wife. And as though to convince him that the ring was an actual reality and not a mere optical delusion, which must presently fade away, the packet contained something else—a note in Luitgard's handwriting, which ran as follows:—

“Yes, you were right. I have changed my mind, for I cannot bear to lose you. I consent to everything. I am ready to become yours, and to follow you to the end of the world. Take me away; only, I implore you, let it be quickly, ere I have time to be racked again by torturing doubts and misgivings.—Yours till death,
LUITA.”

Within an hour the Marchese Frecciacorte had left the Residenz, and, drawn by the fleetest post horses which the town could produce, was speeding towards Castle Pfeilhofen. He reached it late on the following evening, to be received by Wulfhild with an air of mysterious importance as she conducted him to Hedwig's presence. Luitgard had already retired for the night, he could not see her till the following day, and even then he must be extremely careful; for in her frail and delicate condition the least undue excitement might have serious results. These warnings were yet more emphatically repeated by Hedwig, and when, after a prolonged interview, Gastone left her presence, he carried away the firm conviction that Luitgard's happiness, perhaps reason and life itself, depended upon their marriage being accomplished as speedily as possible.

In after days, when Gastone had endeavoured to recall the details of their conversation, he had been unable precisely to remember by what words and arguments Hedwig had succeeded in convincing him of Luitgard's deep attachment to himself. Perhaps he had not at the time examined these arguments over closely, for his own ardent wishes, his own yearning heart, had leaped to meet them half-way. In some infinitely ingenious and subtle fashion, Luitgard's illness had been explained and suggested, as though produced by the excess of her feelings. Beneath her cold, proud exterior she bore a heart unusually delicate and sensitive, and the struggle between love and maidenly reserve it had been, which had caused this nervous collapse. By her own act she had sent away her bridegroom, and had then become a prey to despair because he had obeyed her literally. Did he, the marchese, know so little of women as not to be aware that in love matters no maiden can be judged by her words, which are oftenest in direct contradiction to her secret desires?

All these things were more suggested than said, more hinted at than openly expressed; and though later, when his eyes had been opened by subsequent events, Gastone wondered at his own past simplicity and blindness, at the moment he had perceived no flaw in the arguments, but had guilelessly swallowed all explanations, and implicitly conformed to all Hedwig's injunctions.

It had scarcely even seemed strange to him when told that he must on no account speak to Luitgard about her message, or show her the ring which had been the means of bringing him hither. Her maidenly pride might be wounded if reminded that she had taken the initiative in renewing the engagement. Perhaps she was ashamed of herself, of that passionate appeal to her bridegroom. It must therefore be tacitly ignored between them. Luitgard would be grateful, and would but prize him the more for this delicate reticence.

When on the following morning Hedwig informed her daughter that Gastone had returned in order to claim her to

fulfil her engagement, Luitgard received the news in blank astonishment.

"He asks me to marry him? He has come back for that?" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes, of course. Why should you be surprised? Has he not got your plighted word, and is it not but his right that he is claiming?"

"Yes," returned Luitgard slowly. "I suppose it is his right if he chooses to claim my promise. Only, somehow, I did not—did not expect it."

"You surely did not expect him to wait for ever?" returned Hedwig, watching her daughter keenly. "Has he not already shown sufficient patience in waiting so long? What reason can you give for asking a further delay?"

"None; I shall ask for nothing," retorted Luitgard, throwing up her head with a quick, proud gesture. She had already once humbled herself before this man, who held her fate in his hands, and had implored of him to restore her freedom. She would not do so again now she knew him to be capable of breaking his promise, and of claiming those rights he had feigned to resign. And then she suddenly remembered that her cousin was poor, while she herself was a wealthy heiress. The motive of his conduct was therefore not hard to seek. Yet, mingled with the contemptuous indignation just now paramount in Luitgard's mind, there was also a sense of covert disappointment. Never before had she felt so utterly lonely and forsaken as just now, on learning that Gastone Frecciacorte had returned to claim her as his wife. Many months had now elapsed since she so mysteriously had lost her lover; but to-day she had lost someone whom unconsciously she had begun to regard as a friend.

But he should not reap the reward of his faithlessness, Luitgard told herself. Was there not yet another mode of escape open to her? Bereft of father and lover, betrayed by the man upon whose word she had relied, she would seek refuge from her woes there where Leonora had done.

Nothing of all this, however, transpired on the surface, and

so skilfully were matters arranged that during the four days intervening between Gastone's arrival and the marriage ceremony he was never once allowed to be alone with his pale, silent bride, who submitted to his attentions with a chilly indifference that he would fain attribute to her recent illness.

Thus the eve of the wedding day was reached, and while everyone inside the castle was busily engaged in preparations for the morrow, Luitgard contrived to steal away from the house unobserved.

As with steps still somewhat weak and uncertain, she walked along the chestnut avenue, keeping close to the trees so as to escape observation from the windows, Luitgard endeavoured to realise that she was traversing these well-known precincts for the last time. How often, more especially during that one short year that had seen the birth and the blight of her brief dream of happiness, had she walked thus hither with eager footsteps and joyfully beating heart, to meet the man who had changed the whole current of her life. She had ceased to puzzle over the mystery of his disappearance, all speculation on the subject having been seemingly exhausted in the long weeks of feverish delirium that had followed upon the recognition of her loss. Delius must be dead. Had he not often dropped hints of enemies? That was the only possible explanation of the mystery, and why should she therefore care to remain longer in a world now bereft of the sunshine of his presence?

"Kind Death, be thou my comforter!
The Herons' Tower is high!
Forsaken by her dearest love,
A maid can only die,"

she murmured to herself, as she walked along.

As Luitgard came in sight of the Herons' Tower a sharper pang of anguish, swift and direct as the thrust of pointed steel, seemed to pierce her very soul. When she had last looked upon this spot in early spring, bathed in sunshine and with atmosphere redolent of violet perfume, it had indeed

been an ideal love temple, fit for the exchange of tenderest vows and delirious embraces ; whereas now, looming cold and grey through autumn mists, it seemed to Luitgard like a vast silent tomb wherein lay buried the happiness of her young life. And it was to be her tomb in very truth, she told herself ; for was she not about to ascend that steep turret staircase to the platform above, which alive she would leave no more ?

The evening wind sweeping through the fir-tree branches caused her to shiver a little. She drew her shawl closer about her shoulders, for the long confinement at home had made her chilly and sensitive to cold. But presently Luitgard had flung off the shawl with a bitter laugh, as she remembered that she was going to die. What was the use of keeping warm for a few minutes longer, since by to-morrow morn neither cold nor heat would have power to affect her more ?

Slowly and laggingly she ascended the crumbling moss-grown steps, pausing frequently to rest, for her breath was coming short and pantingly. At last she stood on the platform above, almost on a level with the topmost fir branches across the pool. She could look down into a deserted heron's nest, and idly speculated as to whither the birds had flown, and whether they would come back again next spring ? Then she walked across to the opposite side, where a large irregular break in the castellated wall was known by the name of the Maiden's Leap.

Would they perhaps in after years call it Luitgard's Leap ? she wondered, with a curious thrill of interest. And then she fell to picturing the details of the scene that would take place to-morrow. Who would be the person first to discover her lifeless body ? Or perhaps it would be one of the large stag-hounds which, rending the air with dismal howls, would give the alarm, causing everyone to hurry to the spot. What would Wulfhild say—and her mother ? How would they look on receiving the tidings ? And her cousin—the marchese ? What would he say ? He would keep silence, of course, for he alone would guess the truth, and would know that she had preferred death to the misery of becoming his wife.

Luitgard leant her arms upon the low stone rampart, and

peered over the edge with a sort of gruesome attraction at the sullen green water below, but started back presently affrighted, as a fragment of crumbling stone, slipping from her grasp, bounded down, to disappear in the water with a heavy splash. For a moment she had felt as though she too were falling, and realised what a narrow escape she had just had—how lucky that she had been able to throw herself back in time!

Why lucky? she asked herself in the next moment. What would it have mattered if in truth she had fallen along with yonder stone? Was she not here for that very purpose? Yes, of course, that was her object, her steadfast intention; but only she could not bear the thought of falling thus by accident, without due preparation. She was not yet ready for the final step, the supreme act; she must wait a little longer, in order to collect her thoughts and recover her steadiness, for her brain reeled and everything was swimming around her. She had not before realised how high, how steep, how awful was that sheer face of wall upon which she had just looked down. It was only the sight of the yawning space that was so terrible, and had so unnerved her. If she could have taken the leap blindfolded it would have been quite easy, Luitgard thought. But the flimsy lace handkerchief she carried in her pocket was too short to be used as a bandage. Twilight was, however, falling fast by this time; in half an hour more it would be quite dark, and death would then be robbed of half its horrors. She resolved to wait—the first star that appeared in the sky yonder over the castle should be the signal that it was time to go.

But the star had not yet appeared in sight when Luitgard was roused by a violent blow on the cheek, two large fiery eyes were glaring at her, while simultaneously a diabolical voice seemed to be shouting into her ear—

“To-whoo! to-whoo!
Adieu! adieu!
Go go—below!
Bear on thy woe!
Adieu! adieu!
To-whoo! to-whoo!”

and, seized by a nameless panic, feeling as though she were pursued by a thousand mocking fiends, Luitgard jumped up and fled down the turret steps, not daring to look round, nor slackening her speed until she had reached the middle of the chestnut avenue.

Then only, as she paused from sheer lack of breath, presence of mind, slowly returning, showed Luitgard how vain and groundless had been her alarm. She had suffered herself to be scared by a poor harmless owl, which, equally terrified at finding another occupant of the regions it had come to regard as its own undisputed kingdom, had floundered against her face in the dusk.

And with a yet deeper sense of shame and abasement, Luitgard recognised that she lacked the courage to put her resolution into practice. Since she was not brave enough to face death, there remained to her no other alternative but to go on living, and carry in silence the burden that Fate had laid upon her.

CHAPTER XXVI

A ROYAL LUNATIC

DUKE AUGUSTUS of Buxenburg-Donnerhausen¹ was lying in bed. His long fair hair fell in carefully perfumed curls over a pale green satin nightdress trimmed with exquisite Venetian lace, and in his hands—long, white, and delicate as those of a woman—he was holding a pearl and silver incrustated violin, rich and costly to look at, but which under the touch of the royal musician emitted ear-piercing squeaks and groans, that would not have been tolerated in any village pothouse fiddler.

It was said of Duke Augustus that he was a fanatic about music, and that he regarded himself as the finest violinist in the world; and there were naturally found many courtiers eager to indorse this opinion, and who were ready to swear to his face that Orpheus had been a mere bungler compared to His Serenity.

Whether the duke himself was as firmly persuaded of his musical genius as he assumed to be, may be regarded as doubtful. Beneath a surface of wildest eccentricity, which had long since gained for him the reputation of being the craziest sovereign in Europe, he was a man wise in his generation, and he may, or may not have made the discovery that bad music as well as good, may have its uses, and might even become the more influential weapon in hands that know how to turn it to account. Perhaps, too, it was purest chance

¹ The portrait of the Duke of Buxenburg-Donnerhausen is taken from historical sources, describing the character and personality of an eccentric German ruler who flourished in the eighteenth century.

that the duke almost invariably produced the violin whenever his ministers endeavoured to engage his attention upon any particularly wearisome State affairs. The result was, undoubtedly, that such conclaves were mostly cut short, and that the dignitaries one and all beat a precipitate retreat, holding their ears until well out of reach of those weird discords.

"Are they all gone, Peter?" asked the duke at last, laying down his bow on the crimson damask counterpane with an exhausted expression.

"All but the Chancellor of the Exchequer, your Serenity," returned the servant. "He is just coming up the staircase."

"Then I must go on playing a bit," said the duke testily, taking up the instrument again, and beginning to ply the bow with a diabolical vigour that caused a momentary expression of anguish to flit over the servant's usually stolid countenance. "What hard work it is to govern a State! No one who has not tried it can form an idea of its labours and worries."

The Chancellor of the Exchequer did not, however, make his appearance after all, but turned back abruptly before reaching the door of the antechamber. He had forgotten to bring an important memorandum, he said, and would return on the following day.

"What sort of weather is it to-day, Peter?" asked the duke presently.

"Fine weather," suggested the servant tentatively, endeavouring to surmise from his royal master's countenance what answer would be most congenial.

"Fine, you blockhead! I'll wager my head you are wrong."

"It is only relatively fine, I mean, your Serenity, compared as it were to yesterday; for although the snow is not actually falling, it may begin to snow at any moment, and the wind is a good deal less violent than it has sometimes been."

"Peter, you are a relative and comparative idiot," snarled

the duke. "Cannot you give a plain answer to a simple question? I am not asking about yesterday's weather. Look again, and tell me what it is like to-day."

"There—there is—no weather at all, your Serenity," said the poor man, beginning to tremble; for he knew that many a former servant had been dismissed upon even slighter grounds, merely because he had failed to give the right answer.

The storm, however, passed by as suddenly as it had arisen.

"No weather at all!" laughed the duke, his mobile fancy tickled by the imbecility of the answer. "Then why should I take the trouble to get up and dress to-day? If there is no weather at all, then perhaps there is no landscape either to-day by way of a change, so why should I look out of the windows at something that doesn't exist? Yes, I shall remain in bed to-day, and to-morrow, and next day as well, until this mysteriously absconded weather be pleased to return to the Grand Duchy of Buxenburg. You can therefore send a message to the Lord Chamberlain, to say that I am not coming round to the state apartments to-day, and that I therefore request him to send me the presentation list at once, as I shall hold the circle here in my bedroom."

The little court of Buxenburg was accustomed to such vagaries on the part of its royal master, who had arranged his life upon an entirely original principle, knowing no other law or rule of conduct but what was suggested as congenial and convenient by the whim or inspiration of the moment. Or rather, to speak more truthfully, this so-called originality, was but a very common disposition, to be found in three-quarters of the human race, albeit mostly latent, or painfully repressed by force of circumstances. Private individuals who endeavour to put such secret inspirations into practice, run the risk of being misconstrued, invested with strait-waistcoats, and clapped into mad-houses; and it has only been given to a few lucky

individuals, removed from this danger by circumstances of birth and fortune, to live their lives as free from all claims of duty and obligation as the irresponsible butterfly that flits from flower to flower, recognising no other law but its own sweet will.

About forty years of age at this time, Duke Augustus, despite, or perhaps because of, his studious avoidance of matrimony, had bestowed much attention upon the fair sex at one period of his life. An active and exhaustive study of woman had, however, brought him to the conclusion that the game was not worth the candle. Passion was fatiguing and unwholesome in practice, and mostly inartistic in its results to the actors; and there was far more real satisfaction and amusement to be derived from the part of cool, critical looker-on. Fair women now possessed merely an artistic value for him, and being a connoisseur in this as in all other branches of art, he loved to see himself surrounded by these beautiful puppets, to whose strings he would sometimes administer a covert pull, in order to infuse animation and variety into the performance.

"Count and Countess Pfeilhofen?" said the duke, with a point of interrogation as he held in his hand the list of those who were to be presented to him to-day.

"Yes, Serenissimus. Pfeilhofen, that is to say, Frecciacorte the Italian, who came from Pardenà, and has now resumed the German family name upon his marriage. He has been travelling in Italy ever since, and has only just returned to Buxenburg with his young wife."

"Ah, my grave-faced windmill inspector, to be sure! And he has married a relation—a country cousin, I hear—a granddaughter of that silly old woman, Countess Lilienfeld. I wonder what she is like? Some rustic wench, I suppose, with coarse red hands and blowsy complexion. Well, let us get this tiresome presentation over by all means, and be done with it."

But when the duke had caught sight of Luitgard's exquisitely delicate, high-bred face, set off by every ad-

vantage of dress and ornament, fretful impatience rapidly gave way to pleased and excited admiration. Every fresh discovery of a pretty woman, produced in him delight akin to that of a child to whom a new toy has been presented. He could not rest satisfied until he had examined it from every point of view, and determined the exact position to be occupied by this new ornament in the decoration of his court. True, the new beauty did not seem to have very much to say for herself. She preserved an apathetic silence during the greatest part of the audience, taking her sovereign's rather extravagant flowery compliments, for granted, with almost disdainful indifference. But this curious impassibility, which in any other woman would doubtless have been dubbed flat and dull, but served to enhance the impression made upon the volatile and capricious prince.

"She is quite delicious!" he exclaimed, as soon as the door had closed behind the departing couple. "A veritable snow queen! An ice maiden, who looks as though the burning flames of a thousand adorers would fail to melt her heart! I must have her painted at once in half a dozen different poses. She would make a divine picture dressed in white muslin, and feeding a fawn with snowdrops and daisies; or else robed in dark, very dark green velvet, and with a large polar bear lying at her feet. And stay, Rothbruck; I have an idea. She shall stand model for the statue of the Queen of Beauty to adorn the Houris' Temple, where the gallery of court beauties is to be arranged."

Here the Lord Chamberlain ventured upon an observation.

"But I thought your Serenity had already selected Baroness Ottenring as model for this statue?"

"That was before I had seen this entrancing Countess Pfeilhofen, who certainly beats her hollow."

"It will create no end of jealousy and malicious gossip if the decision be suddenly reversed; the more so as your Serenity well knows that Baroness Ottenring, whose reputation is—ahem—slightly damaged, had secretly hoped to retrieve

her position by marrying the Marchese Frecciacorte, who being a stranger here, would have been easier to capture than those better informed as to her past history. It will therefore scarcely improve her temper to learn that she has been a second time dethroned by this same rival."

"Then her temper must just suffer," returned the duke obstinately. "I cannot permit paltry feminine jealousies to interfere with important artistic considerations. I shall send for Marlin the sculptor this very afternoon and give him my directions."

And so accordingly it was settled, and before twenty-four hours had elapsed all Buxenburg knew that the statue of Countess Luitgard Pfeilhofen, as Queen of Beauty, was to adorn the red marble Temple of the Houris, now in course of construction in the ducal park.

The sculptor to whom this important task had been intrusted was an old man, Marlin by name, who had but lately arrived at Buxenburg, in compliance with an order for the execution of a set of bas-reliefs destined to adorn the sovereign's own mausoleum; for the duke, not satisfied with indulging his artistic propensities to the full during lifetime, was likewise desirous of going down to posterity in becoming and original fashion.

The idea of having to sit for her portrait to a fashionable sculptor had been exceedingly distasteful to Luitgard, and even Gastone was but moderately flattered at this compliment paid to his wife's charms; he did not care to flaunt or advertise his treasure before the world, but would fain have kept it for himself, even though he knew, or believed, that this treasure would never be wholly his.

But in Luitgard, at least, this repugnance vanished at the very first sight of the gentle, melancholy, white-bearded old man, who had lived so long amid marble blocks and statues that something of their immovable serenity, of their supreme aloofness from human passion, seemed to have passed into his patient brown eyes and the melancholy curves of mouth and chin.

There is an instinctive mysterious sympathy about grief

which draws together two afflicted souls, however disparate these may be in all other essentials ; and to Luitgard, who felt like a stranger in this artificial court atmosphere, among people to whom pleasure was the one solitary aim in life, and women who thought nothing of changing their gowns half a dozen times a day, and their lovers as many times a year, the hours spent in the sculptor's *atelier* were like a restful oasis amid troubled seas. She did not require to be told that this man too was unhappy and disappointed, that he had been cruelly betrayed in his tenderest affections, and had now fallen back again upon art, as the one trustworthy and reliable bond that still gave him a hold upon life.

Marlin's history, whose details Luitgard only came to know much later, may briefly be summed up as the tale of two mighty disappointments. Endowed by nature with a passionate adoration for beauty in every shape, he had married a lovely but faithless woman, who had deserted him within a year for a wealthier companion. Twenty years had elapsed since her flight, when a second time Marlin's heart was taken captive by mere physical beauty, unaccompanied by any corresponding moral or mental qualities. Not a woman this time, but a youth of such surpassing comeliness as to render him a living marvel amongst his fellows. The boy—for he was barely fifteen at the time—had been member of an obscure troop of strolling circus players which Marlin had come across in the south of France. In exchange for the pitiful wages he was wont to receive for producing himself in public as a snake charmer and wild-beast subjugator, the youth, in whose veins mingled Greek and gipsy blood apparently ran, readily agreed to accompany the sculptor to his northern home, and serve him as model for the statue of Apollo killing the Python whereon the artist was then engaged. Such only had been Marlin's original intention, but long before the statue of Apollo had reached completion the handsome young vagrant had wormed himself so securely into his employer's heart, that there was no question of their parting again. All the pent-up treasures of affection which

Marlin had erst lavished on his fair false wife, were now transferred to the boy, who was speedily invested with all the rights and privileges of a legitimate son. No apparel was deemed too rich and costly as frame for his marvellous beauty, no pleasure or luxury within the sculptor's means was denied to him. Fain, likewise, would Marlin have sought to complete and correct the boy's neglected education, by engaging for him the ablest instructors in all branches of art and science; but though the youth readily adapted himself to the novel habits of easy living and of wearing soft apparel, he showed little taste for book learning, and was the despair of all his teachers. For music alone did he display considerable facility, and could play several instruments in a fitful, erratic sort of fashion. During three or four years the relations between the sculptor and his fondling remained untroubled—that is to say, the young man passively permitted Marlin to lavish affection and gifts upon him, but, as he grew up, a demon of unrest, transmitted, perchance, with the blood of some gipsy ancestor, took possession of the youth. He would sometimes disappear without warning or farewell, and the first tidings that Marlin would receive of the absconder, after maybe months of anxiety, would be a budget of unpaid bills, or the news of some disreputable orgie wherein he had played a prominent part. Then would follow scenes of recrimination, excuses and futile promises of amendment, always with the same inevitable result of renewed forgiveness, and reiterated relapses into vice. Over and over again Marlin had told himself that he would forgive no more, that he had now irrevocably banished from his heart the obscure vagabond who had shown himself so unworthy of his favour; and each time it had needed but the sight of the youth's glowing eyes and flashing smile, to cancel anger and resentment, and reopen arms and heart to the returning prodigal. But now the end had really come, or so he genuinely believed; for fully six months had elapsed since the last disappearance of Phebus, as the prodigal was called; and as sign that he regarded him as for ever banished from his home and heart, Marlin had

shrouded all the statues of the unworthy fugitive in dense black coverings, like funeral palls.

"My heart is dead, quite dead," he repeated over and over again, with quite unnecessary emphasis. "I have no desire ever to see him again, and even were he to appear before me as a starving beggar, it would cost me no pang to close the door in his face. Why did I not do so long ago, I wonder? It is only that I learnt too late the lesson that all men and women are to be distrusted, save those that are carved in marble." "Believe me, dear lady," he once casually remarked to Luitgard, "you will never be happy until you rightly understand the superiority of stone over flesh and blood. What can be more beautiful, more satisfactory, more reliable than a statue? Such as it was yesterday, such it will be to-morrow and in a hundred years. You can always count upon it, and know for certain that it will neither change nor deteriorate. Those smiling lips which your chisel has formed with loving care, will not be distorted to a cruel sneer, nor will they uncloset to utter bitter, ungrateful words. Those sightless eyes, so tender and true, will never shoot glances of scorn or contempt. But with men and women you are never sure of anything. They change from one day to the other; and the coy, shrinking nymph of yesterday may be a Jezebel or a Messalina to-morrow. Give me marble friends only. That is what I say. Would that I had learnt this lesson long ago!"

And that he had not learnt it yet was pitifully clear even to the most superficial observer, who could not have helped noting how the old sculptor would start and change colour at every passing footstep, or unexpected ring at the door bell. And at last there came a day, somewhere in March, when Luitgard, arriving for the customary sitting, found the old artist all transfigured and radiant under the influence of a new, unlooked-for happiness.

"Wish me joy, dear lady!" he exclaimed, hurrying to meet her with outstretched hands. "I have found him again, my boy, my Phebus. It was not his fault that he stayed

so long away, but of other evil people who led him astray. God forgive me for ever having thought hardly of him. But now he has come back to me, and everything, everything is forgiven and forgotten. Phebus, come here, and let me present you to this noble lady, the Queen of Beauty, whose fair form and features my weak, unworthy hand is endeavouring to reproduce."

And Luitgard, turning, with an almost unbearable shock of surprise found herself confronted by the lover whom she had mourned as dead for nine long months.

CHAPTER XXVII

LEAP YEAR IN ARCADY

WHEN in after days Luitgard looked back upon the weeks that followed her unexpected meeting with Delius, and endeavoured to analyse her thoughts and sensations at that period, it always seemed to her as though she must have been living a strange, irresponsible sort of dream-life, powerless to direct her actions, or arrest the current of events that were sweeping her along towards inevitable ruin.

She never precisely remembered how Delius contrived to explain and render plausible the facts of his sudden disappearance and long silence. Mysterious hints were dropped of secret enemies, who, dogging his footsteps, had forced him to fly the country for awhile. He had been ill, wounded, as he darkly insinuated; and for long had hovered at death's door, and had only recovered his health to learn that she had been faithless, had broken her plighted troth, and had wedded another. This latter fact especially was so skilfully made use of, with such perfidious ingenuity, as completely to turn the tables upon Luitgard, thus made to assume the position of culprit and to sue for forgiveness, instead of being entitled to heap reproaches on his head.

Vainly she endeavoured to resist and fight against the influence that was threatening to destroy her. Even the thought of her marriage vow had little restraining influence upon the torrent of reawakened passion, that had swept over her soul at the first sight of Delius' face and the first sound of his low, musical voice. Gastone was to Luitgard not merely an unloved husband, but moreover a man who had

broken his word ; who from motives of interest had claimed her promise, well knowing how repugnant its fulfilment was to her. What respect could she feel for such a husband ? And what fidelity could possibly be due to him ? Bewildered by the examples she daily saw around her ; conscious only that love was the sole real and palpable thing left in her wrecked and gloomy existence, what wonder if Luitgard gradually reached a point of reckless exaltation which rendered her capable of any folly, any error, almost of any crime ?

Gastone, meanwhile, had noticed nothing, save that Luitgard's cold and apathetic attitude towards himself had remained unchanged at the end of six months' married life. With infinite tenderness and delicacy he had resolved to wait, to win her affection by sheer force of patient endurance ; but in anticipation he had not thought that the trial would prove so hard to bear. That his wife should hitherto have failed to love him, he could understand, for in his self-estimation Gastone was exceedingly modest ; but it had frequently puzzled him to discern on her face an expression, not only of resentment, but which almost looked like contempt, had not the idea appeared so wildly improbable. Feminine caprice and her recent illness might no doubt explain and excuse a great deal, but he could not forbear from asking himself perplexedly why she had summoned him back with such eager, passionate words, only to requite him with this supercilious coldness for having obeyed her behest ? A hundred times already it had been on his lips to give expression to this question, and so put an end to these torturing doubts and misgivings, but each time the words had remained unspoken, as with a renewed act of self-control he had resolved to wait yet a little longer ; and at such moments Gastone would sometimes take out a little black silk bag that hung suspended from a narrow gold chain round his neck, and secretly gaze at its contents, as though therein possessing a talisman invested with powers to steel him to yet further endurance.

Gastone had sometimes accompanied his wife to Marlin's *atelier*, and on one or two occasions he had caught passing

glimpses of the handsome young Greek who was known to be the sculptor's adopted and prodigal son, but he had bestowed little attention upon him; although some latent cloud of memory, vague and intangible, seemed to hover about those classical features and luminous black eyes. But Delius, whose presence of mind never forsook him, was so carefully guarded in manner on those few occasions, that suspicion never chanced to turn in his direction.

Thus the winter wore on to its close, and, as April drew near, the grand-duke, who happened to be in one of his periodical fits of obstreperous gaiety, prepared to celebrate All Fools' Day with unusual and extravagant festivities, this being a golden opportunity of giving form to some of the manifold freakish inspirations which chased each other through his restless brain.

There were to be snares and surprises of all imaginable sorts and descriptions, commencing at daybreak, when the town was to be rudely awakened by trumpet blare and cannon thunder, purporting to convey the news of a Turkish invasion to the terrified citizens. For later in the day, various alarms of fire had been judiciously planned in order to keep up general liveliness of thought and action; while placid calves or gentle lambs invested with the skins of lions and tigers were to make their appearance at unexpected moments and places. Almost every bush or tree in the park, each chair or table in the palace, was to be converted into some ingenious pitfall or *guet-à-pens*, and ample employment traced out for a dozen postmen in conveying fictitious invitations or challenges to half the town.

But the crowning feature of the day was to be the performance of a pastoral drama of the grand-duke's own composition, entitled "Leap Year in Arcady," and, in order to give additional piquancy to the representation, Duke Augustus had chosen to leave the distribution of parts to be decided by Fate, the names of the personages being written on folded slips of paper and mixed with a corresponding number of blanks thrown into a gigantic silver urn. This method

was undoubtedly productive of many startling surprises and incongruous situations, likewise of much discontent and not a little wounded vanity, in those compelled to assume a distasteful or ludicrous character. Thus the stout Lord Chamberlain, Count Rothbruck, to whom the lottery had assigned the part of Cupid, made an exceedingly wry face on reading his fate, and equally dissatisfied were two fresh young maidens condemned respectively to disguise their charms under the assumed characters of a negress and of an old fortune-teller.

Luitgard, to her own great relief, had drawn a blank ; but, less fortunate, Gastone's ticket contained the name of Philon, no other than the hero of the piece, the wealthy young prince for whose favour all the damsels in Arcady are contending.

A burst of merriment had greeted this announcement, and the duke himself had rubbed his hands delightedly on further learning that to the Baroness Ottilia Ottenring had fallen the part of Clelia, the heroine.

"This promises to be lively," he had said, with much satisfaction, "for if I know the fair Ottilia aright, she will put her best foot foremost in order to pay off old scores."

And in truth Baroness Ottenring, a handsome but somewhat wanton young widow, whose auburn hair hung in such luxuriant ringlets about her full neck and bosom, and in whose sea-green eyes there lurked such a wealth of voluptuous passion, had seen in this conjunction of parts the direct instrumentality of Providence, putting into her hand the means of avenging the double slight that had been put upon her.

Was it not enough to have missed the chance of a marriage that would have enabled her to retrieve her somewhat insecure footing in society, but must she also forsooth be dethroned from her position as Queen of Beauty in favour of this cold, inapproachable new star, whose haughty reserve even towards her own husband, had not passed unnoticed at the court of Buxenburg? Yes, she would show the poor deluded man what it felt like to be loved by a woman of flesh and

blood instead of by a pale, ethereal shadow ; and it would go hard if, for one evening at least, she did not contrive to turn his head and make him regret his choice.

Actuated by these sentiments, Ottilia Ottenring threw herself heart and soul into her part, bringing to the rehearsals all the wiles and witcheries which a long and varied experience of men had taught her : which however in this case but produced a diametrically opposite effect from what had been calculated. Over and over again, as in compliance with the exigencies of his part the unhappy marchese submitted to be made love to, languished over, his hand pressed, and his cheek fanned, by the breath of a woman to whom he was profoundly indifferent, his fancy would try to put Luitgard in her place ; and, with an almost uncontrollable longing, he yearned to know how these same impassioned words, and high-flown sentiments, would have sounded if spoken by Luitgard's pale, exquisite lips. Accordingly, on the eve of the 1st of April, the day fixed for the representation, Gastone, sitting alone with his wife, turned suddenly towards her with a strange light shining in his usually impassive blue eyes.

"Luitgard," he said, in a short, jerky fashion, "I want you to be good enough to help me with my part. Will you hear me recite the verses which I shall have to say to-morrow ?"

She looked up with a little start from the tapestry frame over which she was bending. Luitgard had taken to such handiwork lately, finding in this employment a convenient refuge from the necessity of conversation. Seemingly engrossed in counting stitches, or matching shades of colour, her thoughts were free to roam where they listed ; and between the many daisies and daffodils, roses and pansies, which her busy needle had traced on the canvas, one face and form ever floated before her eyes. Abruptly recalled to a sense of the present, she answered hurriedly, while a flash of tell-tale colour came into her cheek—

"Very well, you can repeat the verses ; I am listening."

"But you must put down your work and hold the book, or else you cannot correct me when I make a mistake," persisted

Gastone. "See, here it is—the fourth scene in the third act which I want to rehearse."

With an air of wearied resignation, Luitgard laid down her work and took up the book.

"You can begin," she said, with freezing courtesy.

Gastone began to recite the monologue in which Philon, a young prince who has turned hermit in consequence of a disappointment in love, expresses satisfaction at his approaching release from the persecutions of the fair sex, to which, in compliance with the law of the land, he has been obliged to submit during leap year; and he is of course unaware that the young shepherd lad, who, by telling him a heart-rending tale of poverty and hunger, has obtained permission to share his solitude, is no other than Clelia herself, his former sweetheart, disguised in a dingy sheepskin mantle and with a wide-brimmed hat slouched over her fair features.

PHILON.

"Praise to ye gods! behold, the setting sun!
But few hours more the leaping year is run—
No brazen nymph, no bold, audacious maid,
Shall more these hallowed premises invade;
No wanton foot shall here again intrude,
To pry upon my blissful solitude."

"Well?" said Luitgard interrogatively, as Gastone came to an end of this monologue. "Why do you not go on?"

"Because you must now read Clelia's part. That is absolutely necessary in order to keep up the thread of the scene."

"As you choose," returned Luitgard. And in a cold, measured voice she began to read—

CLELIA.

"Hast then forgot thy promise, master dear,
My stricken head awhile to shelter here?
From stony-hearted men my woes to hide,
And live in safety by thy gracious side?
No other boon I ask, no favour crave,
But for to serve thee as a humble slave."

THE HERONS' TOWER

PHILON (*carelessly*).

"Yes, yes, fair boy, thy presence does but count
As bee, or butterfly, or splashing fount,
As does the gentle sighing of the breeze,
Or warbling bird upon the greenwood trees."

CLELIA (*aside*).

"And yet I'll warrant that he never heard
Such hot love-ditty sung by warbling bird
As that which presently shall greet his ear
When I have doffed this shrouding mantle here;
A painted butterfly in vain he'd seek
To match the roses upon Clelia's cheek,
Nor does the garden hold a single flower
Whose fragrant perfume has the subtle power
The ecstasy of sweetness to eclipse
That can bestow a pair of coral lips.
And far beyond the play of fountain clear,
Methinks the action of a single tear
From downcast eyes: when with upheaving breast
Poor Clelia her past errors has confessed!
And when he learns that all these maiden charms
But wait to be enfolded in his arms,
Ah, surely then those arms will open wide
To clasp a happy and forgiven bride!
Dissolved in bliss, upon my Philon's heart
I'll rest; from him again no more to part!"

The contrast between these impassioned lines and the cold, formal tone in which they were recited, would have irresistibly appealed to the comic sense of any other auditor, but Gastone saw nothing comic in the present situation. To him it was all pure, unalloyed tragedy—the tragedy of a strong, manly love that recognises the impossibility of awakening any response. This conviction, which until now Gastone had endeavoured to conceal from himself, now stood out with merciless lucidity before his eyes. Luitgard did not, could never return his love, or else it would not have been possible for her to read those lines as she had done.

But with self-torturing instinct he could not, however, refrain

from driving the iron a little farther into his soul by the remark—

“You do not read it rightly, Luitgard.”

“Not rightly? Why, I read all the words just as they are printed. I am quite sure that I did not miss anything.”

The marchese got up suddenly and came up quite close to where Luitgård was sitting, and looked down into her eyes with almost fierce intensity:

“I will tell you what it is that you missed,” he said hoarsely. “The feeling, the ardour, the love that these verses are supposed to express. Now, Baroness Ottilia recites her part in quite—quite a different manner.”

“I daresay,” retorted Luitgard, with an imperceptible curl of the lip. “Baroness Ottenring is no doubt a better actress than I am. I—I do not know how to play a part.”

And yet she blushed as she said it, involuntarily lowering her eyes; for was she not playing a part all the time, and playing it so successfully that not even a shadow of suspicion had arisen in her husband’s mind? Some latent instinct of concealment it may have been which caused her presently to add—

“Besides, how is it possible to feel sympathy with the sentiments here expressed? The whole part of Clelia is a revolting one. That a woman should offer herself to a man in this unblushing fashion passes my comprehension.”

“But supposing that Clelia had changed her mind? That is a thing that sometimes happens, does it not?” pursued Gastone, still scrutinising his wife with a puzzled expression. “When she first flirted with Philon and had then refused him, it had been under a misapprehension. She was too young—was not herself aware of her own feelings. Now that she has learnt to know her own heart, was she not right to let him see it? Should she then have held her tongue and pined away for love of Philon, whereas by speaking one word the happiness of two lives was secured?”

“Yes,” retorted Luitgard vehemently, “she should have kept silence, should rather have died than sacrifice her

maidenly pride in this fashion. That is what I should have done in her place. In my opinion it is quite as ignoble for a maiden to pursue a man, as it would be for a man to hold a maid to the fulfilment of an engagement he knows to be repugnant to her."

At these words, spoken with unmistakable disdain, Luitgard had risen to her feet, and stood facing her husband for a moment, as though the better to emphasize her meaning. Gastone had grown very pale, and with an involuntary movement had thrust his hand into the breast of his doublet, half drawing out from its place of concealment the little black silk bag that never left his person, sleeping or waking. For a moment he seemed about to speak, to summon Luitgard to explain herself once for all, and elucidate what was mysterious and perplexing in their strange, unhappy union.

But the impulse passed by as quickly as it had come, and the action remained unexplained, as he thrust back the talisman into its hiding-place. Luitgard looked so fragile, so delicate; there was an expression of such fixed and hopeless melancholy in her violet blue eyes, now underlined with dark, heavy streaks, that his heart recoiled from the mere possibility of giving her pain. Her last year's illness, whose traces would seem to be not yet wholly obliterated; Hedwig's mysterious warnings; his own chivalrous feeling that it would be mean and disloyal to reproach a woman because she had perhaps acted under a mistaken impulse;—all these thoughts combined choked down the words in his throat, and once more he kept silence, as he turned away with a barely disguised sigh.

But Luitgard had noted the gesture, and it was now her turn to look and feel mystified. It was clearly impossible that Gastone should have failed to understand her allusion; and yet there was no trace of shame or confusion on his face; naught save a look of melancholy dignity, for which she could find no explanation. Often during that day she caught herself recurring with uneasy speculation to the subject of the little black silk bag whereon her husband appeared to set such unusual store.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALL FOOLS' DAY

THE grand-duke had not been mistaken in anticipating lively results from the performance of his pastoral drama entitled "Leap Year in Arcady," but he remained unaware that the most animated scenes that evening were not those that took place on the stage of the little court theatre; likewise that none of the April fools devised by his ingenious brain could attempt to vie with the shocks produced by certain unexpected disclosures that took place a few hours later.

Stiff, silent, and irresponsive, Luitgard, attired in white brocade, and adorned with costly ornaments of sapphires mixed with diamonds, had sat through the performance with an ever-growing sensation of oppression and discomfort. Though she had never even pretended to care for her husband, it was yet distinctly distasteful to see him receiving the embraces and passionate declarations of another woman. It was unfitting, in bad taste, she told herself.

Nor did her dissatisfaction cease with the end of the representation, for, as though possessed by some tormenting fiend, Baroness Ottilia seemed determined not to relinquish her grasp upon the partner whom Fate had assigned to her, and, as she laughingly announced, the privileges of leap year still held good throughout that evening. Consequently, when the music presently struck up in the ballroom, it was upon Gastone that devolved the privilege of leading her to the minuet, and when, an hour or two later, the couples began to file off to the supper-room, it was again in close proximity

to the full white shoulders and red-gold hair of the chief Arcadian shepherdess, that Luitgard caught a fleeting glimpse of her husband's figure.

Vague hints that she had overheard, scarcely realised scraps of gossip, hitherto dull and meaningless, began all at once to stir and take shape in Luitgard's brain. She now remembered having heard some rumour of a contemplated marriage between Baroness Ottilia and Gastone Frecciacorte, when he had first arrived at the court of Buxenburg. That idea—if ever seriously entertained—had been quickly abandoned; for then he had come to Castle Pfeilhofen, and the marriage with herself had been arranged. But how, supposing his heart to have been given all along to Ottilia Ottenring? Would there be anything surprising in that? Might not, indeed, any man fall victim to those charms, whose full extent Luitgard had only this evening realised, on seeing them displayed and accentuated by the details of a costume such as assuredly no modest woman would have cared to don. She now understood why it was that Baroness Ottilia had always accosted her with such scanty courtesy, as almost to resemble veiled animosity; and casting about for some corresponding trait in her husband's behaviour, there suddenly arose before Luitgard's mental eye the vision of Gastone as she had seen him to-day, standing before her pale and agitated, while his hand nervously fingered the little silk bag that hung round his neck. Leaping to what seemed to be the inevitable conclusion of this circumstance, Luitgard felt no difficulty in deciding that this bag must contain some relic belonging to her auburn-haired rival—a lock of hair or a flower perhaps. But she must have certainty at any price, she told herself. Not that anything Gastone could say or do could arouse her jealousy—such an idea was too obviously ridiculous. But perhaps, unbeknown to herself, she was anxious to discover something distinct and palpable that, by lowering her husband in her eyes, would relieve her from the burden of half-unwilling respect she could not entirely withhold. In some dim, unrealised fashion she may have felt that with a husband clearly convicted of unworthiness

and disloyalty, she too would be more at liberty to act as she chose, and set aside conventional obligations.

The opportunity which she sought was not long in coming, and it is probable that had no such opportunity occurred, Luitgard would have made one for herself, such diplomatic strategy being a science wherein every loving or jealous woman is a born expert. As it was, however, the wheels of Fate's chariot did not require to be specially greased for the occasion, nor to receive a covert shove in order to be set in motion. It all came about quite simply and naturally.

Luitgard and her husband were alone in their bedroom on returning from the party at the Grand Ducal Palace. It was late, or rather early, for the grey dawn outside was beginning to mingle with the ruddier shimmer cast by waxen tapers in silver girandoles upon the mantelpiece. She had dismissed her tiring-woman under pretext of headache; she desired to sit a little beside the open window before retiring to bed, to let the cool breeze fan her flushed and heated face. After the long, hours spent in over-heated, over-crowded rooms, it was unspeakably refreshing to inhale the pure morning air eagerly, in long, thirsty draughts. The narrow line of grey light just visible above pointed house gables, was growing broader every minute, and the twittering chorus of house sparrows was noisily proclaiming the near approach of day.

But Luitgard's eyes were not fixed on the outside world; she was furtively watching her husband, who, still attired in his costume of the pastoral drama, was moving restlessly about the room, apparently as little disposed for sleep as herself. Presently he approached her with a white cashmere shawl, which he carefully placed about her shoulders.

"You will catch cold, Luitgard," he said anxiously. "It is imprudent to sit by the open window in that dress."

Luitgard gave a hard little laugh.

"My gown is quite warm enough," she said, pushing back the soft white folds with an ungracious gesture. "You see that my neck and arms are scarcely at all uncovered. For some people, no doubt, it would be imprudent to expose themselves

thus to the air. There are women whose bodices scarcely deserve the name, and who have no sleeves at all to their gowns."

Making no answer to his wife's remark, Gastone had resumed his restless walk to and fro through the room. Unaccountably irritated by his silence, which seemed to her like a confession of guilt, Luitgard rose from her chair and approached the tall mirror above the chimney-piece, ostensibly for the purpose of detaching the arrangement of pale blue plumes and diamond stars adorning her powdered hair.

"Why do you not answer? Do you not agree with me?" questioned Luitgard, turning away from the mirror with one large diamond star held between her fingers.

"Agree with you?" counter-questioned Gastone, whose thoughts meanwhile had wandered off into other regions.

"I mean in considering it very imprudent—and—and—unfitting for women to wear their gowns made in that manner, leaving arms and bosom almost bare."

"Most unfitting," agreed the marchese readily. "I would not for the world see my wife attired in such fashion."

"But you do not consider it unfitting in Baroness Ottilia Ottenring?" pursued Luitgard, still harping upon the same theme, and eyeing her husband steadily in order to mark whether he would start or change colour at the name; while the diamond star trembled with an angry glitter between her nervous fingers. "Why do you not blame her for doing what you would consider unseemly in me?"

"Because it is no duty of mine to criticise what Baroness Ottilia may do or leave undone. She is not my wife."

No trace of guilt on his grave, manly face, not even the shadow of constraint to be detected in his tone, as he said the words.

Surely this must be the very perfection of dissimulation, thought Luitgard; and she was just considering how to formulate her next question, so as to lead him up to the desired confession, when he too drew near the mirror with the self-same object of removing some of the superfluous ornaments that belonged to

his dramatic costume. The first thing to be got rid of was the fair wig of ambrosial curls that made such an incongruous frame to his serious cast of feature ; but, as he now attempted to pull it off, one long curl had got entangled with the narrow gold chain he wore round his neck, and refused to part company, though he tugged away energetically.

"Let me assist you," said Luitgard, who had never ceased watching him ; and she laid down the diamond ornaments on the mantelpiece.

Somewhat surprised, for he was wholly unused to such marks of attention on his wife's part, Gastone turned towards her, and stood immovable as with lithe, deft fingers she skilfully disengaged the captive lock. It was now free ; but as the curly wig dropped carelessly to the ground, Luitgard's fingers still clutched the delicate gold chain, as though unwilling to relinquish their grasp. It now only required a gentle pull in order to bring to sight the little silk bag whose contents had been the subject of so much speculation to-day. Now or never, surely, was the opportunity she desired.

"Why do you wear this ? What is there inside that bag ?" she said, looking up into his eyes with piercing directness. "It must be something vastly precious, as you seem to set such store on it."

This time he had undoubtedly started. Luitgard could distinctly see the tremor that ran over his frame as they stood thus close together, almost touching. But if his voice trembled slightly, he returned her gaze steadily, as he replied, with a peculiar emphasis—

"It is something precious—ininitely precious to me. My greatest treasure."

She had certainly not been prepared for such a brazen and shameless acknowledgment of the fact ; and sheer surprise at his effrontery kept her silent for nearly a whole minute, before she found words to say, with stammering indignation—

"Precious—a treasure ! You dare say that to me—to me, your wife ? But I demand—I insist upon seeing it. You durst not refuse me—it is my right."

But the angry flow of words on Luitgard's lips was cut short, as without any sign of reluctance he had already detached the little bag from the chain. There was only a mild wonder in his eyes, only deep sadness in his voice, as he said, putting it into her hands—

"Of course you may look at it, although that is scarcely necessary. Surely you already know—must guess what it is that I prize so highly? You have not been so lavish in your keepsakes, as to have overburdened either your memory or my own in that way."

But Luitgard, scarcely hearing the last words, had already untied the strings that held together the little bag, and with indescribable stupefaction was gazing at the objects it contained—a ruby ring and a folded-up piece of paper. It was the ring which first claimed her attention, as the most surprising and remarkable of the two objects.

"What does it mean? I do not understand," she faltered helplessly, still unable to bring her mind to the realisation of something so utterly different from what she had expected to see.

"The ring. But surely you recognise it, Luitgard? Our engagement ring. It has never left my breast since the day I received it back again."

Luitgard put her hand to her forehead with a groping automatic gesture, as though painfully endeavouring to recall something she had forgotten.

"Yes, I remember," she said at last slowly. "I had put it away in my trinket drawer before I fell ill. That was a long time ago. And when I was able to get up again, it had disappeared. I searched for it at first, for I was sorry; but then I forgot all about it."

"And where did you find it at last?" questioned Gastone, to whom his wife's manner was growing more and more incomprehensible.

"But I never found it at all," she returned almost petulantly. "How can you ask such pointless questions? Why, evidently you must have found it yourself, or else it would not be here in your possession."

Gastone's face had suddenly assumed a drawn, haggard, almost a frightened look.

"One of us two must be dreaming, Luitgard!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Surely you have not forgotten—you do not mean to deny that you sent me back that ring of your own free will, as sign of your consent to become my wife?"

"Never!" she exclaimed so emphatically as to carry conviction but also despair to his mind. "I never sent you that ring, never even dreamt that it had been found. How did you get it? There must be some dreadful mistake somewhere."

"How could there be any mistake when it came clearly addressed to me, although the handwriting on the outside cover was not your own? That was on the morning of the 28th of September, and I started at once for Pfeilhofen on receiving the news. Our marriage took place on the 4th of October, just a week later."

But a wild flash of enlightenment had come into Luitgard's eyes, and with something like a shriek the words burst from her lips—

"My mother! It must be her doing! It is she who has sold me, who has cheated me of my happiness! Simpleton that I was, not to have guessed it before! She never loved me, because I was not Kunibert, and now she has made me wretched for life!"

Gastone too was beginning to understand, although with him revelation came more gradually, like morning clouds slowly rolling away to disclose the blasted ruins of some bright air-castle.

"Then do you mean that it was all a mistake, our marriage?" he said slowly and heavily, like a man who has just received a blow on the head.

"Yes, a mistake—a hideous, dreadful mistake!" moaned Luitgard. But even as she said the words there shot through her mind the thought that, after all, Gastone was not guilty, as she had believed. He had not been disloyal, had not broken his given word, as she had been supposing all along. And

as for those other absurd suspicions regarding Ottilia Ottenring, which had been filling her mind a little while ago, their very remembrance had completely evaporated, blotted out by the blinding light of this new tremendous revelation. It required but a glance at her husband's distraught countenance to recognise that his sufferings were no less acute than her own; and, with an impulse of tardy generosity and justice, she was about to say some words softer and more conciliatory than those which had lately passed her lips, when he intercepted her intentions, turning upon her with sudden passion.

"Yes—the ring—I can possibly explain or understand how it came to be sent without your knowledge. But how about the note? You did not write that in your sleep, I suppose, and yet it is clearly in your own handwriting."

The note, still folded up, was lying on the mantelpiece between the black silk bag and the diamond star, where Luitgard had laid it down in order the better to examine and identify the ring. The pale morning light streaming in through the open window was already filling the room with a ghastly radiance, so that Luitgard scarcely required to approach the paper to the low burning wax tapers in order to read as follows:—

"Yes, you were right. I have changed my mind, for I cannot bear to lose you. I consent to everything. I am ready to become yours, and to follow you to the end of the world. Take me away; only, I implore you, let it be quickly, ere I have time to be racked again by torturing doubts and misgivings.—Yours till death,
LUITA."

This revelation was if possible even more overwhelming than the former one. That note—the very last one she had written to Delius just before his mysterious disappearance—how did it come here into her husband's possession along with the ring? Yet darker, more sinister machinations than she had guessed at, were evidently here at work.

But Luitgard was not allowed any time for speculation on

the subject, for again Gastone interrupted her train of thought.

"You wrote those words, you cannot deny it. Then, since they were evidently not addressed to me, they must have been written to some other man!"

Luitgard was silent; but the tightly closed lips, and the steely hardness that had come into her blue eyes, told him sufficiently that she had a secret and meant to keep it.

"Who is he? What is his name? I have a right to know!" cried Gastone, who, lashed to exasperation by what he had read in his wife's face, seized hold of her arm in no very gentle grasp. His fingers, closing over a narrow sapphire bracelet which she wore on her wrist, pressed down the hard bright stones into the delicate flesh, yet her lips were obstinately silent.

"Will you tell me his name?" repeated Gastone, still holding her wrist imprisoned.

"I will tell you nothing. You know now already that I was tricked, cheated into marrying you—that consequently there can be no question of duty in our relations," she said at last, smarting fully as much under the physical pain she was enduring as from the mental agony of the moment.

"By the heavens above us, I swear you shall learn your mistake!" he exclaimed. "If there has been cheating or trickery in this matter, I at least am guiltless of it. And whether I owe my wife to fair means or foul, it matters not now. I mean to keep her, and shall suffer neither man nor devil to come between us."

Luitgard gazed back at him in astonishment. Was this the man, usually so placid and passive, so carefully regulated in words and demeanour, and who just now upon the stage had shown himself so incapable of being roused to excitement or passion? The flashing, imperious blue eye, the masterful grasp of the arm—all these were strange and unfamiliar to her in the man who, for nearly half a year, had been her husband. For the first time it struck Luitgard that Gastone might almost be called handsome, despite the ascetic meagre-

ness of his face, which caused the high-bred features to stand out as though chiselled in marble.

"Who is that man?" repeated Gastone, shaking his wife's arm with redoubled fury.

"Ah! You have hurt me!" now burst from Luitgard's pale, tortured lips with an involuntary cry of pain. And as her husband suddenly released his grasp of the bruised and injured wrist, a drop of blood trickled slowly down the rich white brocade, to settle in a large unsightly blotch on the delicate lace flounce at its lower edge.

The sight of his wife's blood, shed by his own hand, had the effect of abruptly cooling Gastone's hot passion. No further word was spoken between them, as for yet a moment longer they stood facing each other in the wan morning light, each conscious only of a new insurmountable chasm that now yawned between them—a chasm wherein lay shattered the last wrecks of possible happiness.

CHAPTER XXIX

A MOMENT OF MADNESS

IT was late in the afternoon when Luitgard awoke from a heavy, unrefreshing sleep, with a confused sense of misery and disaster weighing down upon her. Her head, too, was throbbing with a dull pain, and her wrist, stiff and swollen, was acutely sore to the touch.

Then, with returning consciousness, the recollection of recent events and revelations broke in upon her in fitful, disjointed fashion. She had been a dupe all along—tricked, cheated out of the happiness that was her birthright. Her mother—it could only have been her doing; and Gastone, too, how terrible he had been when he had seized her arm and shaken it so roughly! For a moment he had looked as though about to kill her. How could she stay longer under his roof? Surely this was impossible?

And from this jumble of bewildered and feverish thought one idea only stood out clear and imperative before her mind. Delius! Delius! Surrounded as she believed by enemies on all sides, to whom else could she now turn? On whom else rely? Delius! Delius! Yes, she would go to him and put her fate in his hands. That was the only way. And she must do it at once, before new intrigues, fresh machinations, rose up to part them again.

It was a relief to hear that her husband had been summoned to the palace on some errand connected with his nominal duties. Hastily dressing, she ordered the carriage, and was soon on her way to Marlin's abode, which lay a little outside the town, although twilight was falling fast, and she knew

that the sculptor never worked but in full daylight. What did it matter now? She was in no mood to stop and seek for plausible excuses, for was she not about to break irretrievably with all conventions? She was going to tell Delius that she was ready to fly with him to the end of the earth. The surrender contained in that delirious note, which as an ignorant, innocent girl she had penned to her lover, she was now ready to endorse far more unconditionally than formerly. She had now, as she told herself, seen the world, tasted of its pleasures and found them hollow. What then remained but love? And for love she was now prepared to sacrifice everything. Her marriage vow—what of it? She had only to look round in order to see how lightly this engagement was taken by many women who had not the same excuse of having been tricked into a distasteful union.

The sculptor was not at home—he seldom was at this hour; but, even had he been, it is doubtful whether his presence would have had any restraining influence upon Luitgard, in her present high-strung and overwrought nervous condition. She never even paused to see whether or not they were alone, as, on catching sight of Delius standing at the far end of the corridor leading to Marlin's *atelier*, she ran to meet him, throwing herself recklessly upon his breast as she sobbed out her pitiful, incoherent tale in short, convulsive gasps.

Had she been but a degree less excited, less completely unnerved and distraught, Luitgard could not have failed to discover fresh food for perplexity from the manner in which Delius received the disclosure of events and incidents that he could not be supposed to know or to guess. Not an exclamation of surprise escaped his lips, by no word or question did he seek to interrupt her confused and rambling narrative; and when, from the breathless enumeration of the plots and intrigues by means of which their happiness had been blasted, Luitgard passed on to passionate supplications that he would take her away at once and for ever, from this cruel, heartless world, there was a curious hesitation—almost reluctance—in his manner of receiving her appeal.

Just a year ago he had been the pleader, and she it was who, shrinking and timorous, had some difficulty in screwing up her courage to the decisive step of an elopement; but to-day the parts were inverted. Not that Luitgard had lost her fascination for the ardent and sensuous young Greek; but if his blood was hot, his head was remarkably cool, and he realised to the full what a different thing it would be to abscond with the wife of another man, than to have eloped with the girl whom he had believed to be undisputed heiress of Pfeilhofen. Moreover, he had but recently made his peace again with Marlin, his long-suffering foster-father, when, after nine months spent in reckless dissipation with those five thousand thalers which had been the price of his renunciation of Luitgard, he had come back once more to the paternal roof, almost starving, and with empty pockets. This time it had been somewhat more difficult to make his peace than on any previous occasion. It had cost him a few more ingenious lies, a little more skilful acting, ere the sculptor's old soft heart was finally stormed and he had found himself reinstated in his former position. Was it prudent, therefore, to tempt fate and Marlin's powers of forbearance so soon again by a fresh escapade, graver and more scandalous than any former one? Besides, such an escapade required money, and he had none at his disposal, and knew of no one who would be willing to advance the necessary funds. To get the money out of Marlin was clearly impossible at present, unless indeed it could be managed. . . .

An ugly smile played about his lips as he sat thus reflecting, while Luitgard's fair head rested on his shoulder in an attitude of helpless abandonment, and her low musical voice rang in his ears beseeching him to take her away—far away, where she would never again see those who had bartered her young life like a piece of merchandise. He would take her, would he not, to those bright islands of which he had so often told her? To the sunny South, where they would live in orange groves surrounded by flowers?

So Luitgard's rambling petitions ran on; but still Delius sat silent, plunged in thought. As yet he had formed no definite conclusions; he was merely toying with the various schemes and possibilities revolving through his ingenious brain.

"Why do you not answer, Delius? Can we not start at once—this evening? What is there to keep us back?" persisted Luitgard, struck at last by this abnormal passivity on her lover's part.

"I was only reflecting, my Luita, how it can be managed," he replied evasively. "It is not as simple as you suppose, and will require some preparation."

"Preparation?" exclaimed Luitgard, aghast, who already in coming here had mentally burnt her vessels, and had no thought of ever returning to her husband's roof.

"Yes, preparations," repeated Delius firmly. "In the first place, we shall require money. Love alone would not take us very far, or keep us alive, as you seem to imagine."

"Oh, but I had already thought of that. I am not quite as foolish as you seem to think," exclaimed Luitgard, with an air of almost childish satisfaction. "Look here, I have brought my jewels in this bag—all those I wore last night at the palace. See, here are five diamond stars that were in my hair, and the sapphire and diamond necklace with bracelets to match, and here the large diamond brooch and buckle with sapphire pendants, and the earrings too. I believe they are worth very much money, and they can all be sold, can they not?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Delius, as in a moment his eyes seemed to catch fire from the stones which in a glittering heap Luitgard had poured into her lap. "That was clever of you, my Luita! How beautiful they are!" He plunged his hands delightedly among the scintillating gems, letting them glide through his fingers with a caressing touch, as Luitgard had often seen him toying with violets and primroses, in those bygone days near the Herons' Tower.

The sight of the jewels seemed to have had the effect of

assisting Delius to come to a decision. His manner grew perceptibly warmer and more eager, as he presently began to sketch out the plan he had conceived with his habitual swift energy. It was impossible to start this self-same evening, nor would it be prudent for them to leave Buxenburg simultaneously; and it would be obviously insane, as he forcibly impressed upon Luitgard, to attempt to dispose of any of the jewels here in the Residenz, where they would of course be instantly identified. Therefore, after a little discussion, it was agreed that Luitgard was to go to Pfeilhofen at once, and there await Delius, who would join her in two or at most three days later, after having meanwhile procured sufficient ready money to enable them to start. After her recent painful scene with her husband, he could not surely refuse to let her go home for a while, and the prospect of a short separation would probably be as welcome to him as to herself.

Half unwillingly, Luitgard was obliged to consent to these arrangements, recognising the justice of her lover's arguments, although inwardly chafing at the enforced delay. Having once strung herself up to the point of breaking with all conventional ties, it was chilling and depressing to be obliged to wait and temporise, to go on playing a part for a few days longer, just when she had thought to cast aside the mask for ever.

Moreover, she was conscious of an almost superstitious reluctance to parting again from Delius, even for days or merely hours. Dark forebodings, secret misgivings that new, unforeseen barriers might spring up between them, thronged in her mind. Her mother—that woman who had already once cheated her, might she not do so again? and her husband—that man who only a few hours ago, with features convulsed with passion, had so emphatically asserted his rights, and proclaimed his intention of keeping his wife to himself, might he not unexpectedly step in, to put his threats into practice?

As to Delius, his quick powers of reasoning had shown him that he had much to gain and comparatively little to lose in

the present conjunction of circumstances. If the plan he had conceived ran smoothly, without any hitch, he would have a long spell of enjoyment with an entrancing companion to look forward to, while if he failed in what was now his chief object, and was unable to rejoin Luitgard—why, then there always remained the jewels, which could never be traced, because the only person capable of denouncing him would have the strongest motives for keeping silence.

CHAPTER XXX

THE DAY OF RECKONING

GASTONE had raised no objection, attempted no demur, when on that same evening Luitgard, in a few cold words, had signified her intention of going to Pfeilhofen on the following day. Possibly, indeed, he may have felt this decision as a relief; but as with silent courtesy he handed his wife into the travelling coach early next morning, there was no expression on his countenance to indicate whether he regarded this abrupt departure as the first step towards a lifelong separation, or as the prelude to a happier state of things.

Luitgard's sudden arrival at Pfeilhofen was a considerable surprise to the two solitary women, who had spent this long winter in an almost unbroken and dreary *été-d'hiver*, which must perforce have damped the spirits of any girl less innately vigorous than was Wulfhild. But Hedwig, whose health was visibly declining, could not bear to part from the girl whose voice and features recalled those of the only man she had ever loved. And Wulfhild, though sometimes feeling like a caged eagle, that longs to break through its prison bars in order to fly out into the wide world, was obliged perforce to have patience. Even had she left Pfeilhofen, and so destroyed the last consolation of a dying and disappointed woman, she would not have known where to seek for Delius. The news of his return to his adopted father some few weeks previously had not yet reached her ears, and Delius himself had probably taken care that the tidings should be slow in coming.

Luitgard's explanation of her sudden appearance—that she

was unwell, exhausted by the fatigues of court life and festivities, and required the change to country air in order to recruit her strength—could deceive neither Hedwig nor Wulfhild. That she was unwell was indeed very evident; her eyes were underlined by dark shadows, and there were feverish fluctuating spots on her cheek; but so was it equally self-evident to these two close observers, that some underlying cause of grave mental disturbance must have produced these symptoms. But these thoughts found no immediate expression, save in the pensive, dissatisfied frown on Hedwig's pale forehead, and the watchful alertness wherewith Wulfhild kept guard over Luitgard's every movement and passing expression.

And Luitgard, too, was silent; for all outward symptoms of the fierce resentment filling her heart towards the mother who had betrayed her, had to be forcibly repressed. Upon this point Delius had been imperative in his injunctions, which she obeyed uncomprehendingly, and without asking herself why he had appeared so anxious, almost apprehensive of her revealing to Hedwig the unhappiness of the married life to which her mother had condemned her. And, after all, what did it signify now? she reflected. Of what good were reproaches and recriminations, since she was about to do that which, far more effectually than any words, would punish the proud and heartless woman, who for a name and a coat of arms had bartered the happiness of her only child? But two or three days more at the utmost, and the bolt would have fallen. She would have fled with Delius to his bright, sunny home over the seas, leaving behind her a letter wherein all the gall and bitterness with which her young life had been saturated should at last be poured forth.

But though each kept silence, the atmosphere was felt to be charged with electricity. It was but the lull before the storm, which must presently come with the greater violence for having been deferred.

It was on the evening of the third day after Luitgard's arrival, that Wulfhild came into Hedwig's chamber, with

flushed cheeks, and that peculiar sinister yellow glance in her eyes, that always boded mischief; and in a tone of repressed excitement laconically informed the countess that she had seen Luitgard in the act of taking a note from one of the stone urns near the Herons' Tower.

"Why did you not intercept it, or at least ascertain its contents?" questioned Hedwig reproachfully.

Wulfhild shook her head angrily:

"Impossible. It was already too dark, and even as it was I had the greatest difficulty in approaching near enough unobserved to see what I did. Luitgard is no longer the ignorant child she was a year ago, and she has learnt at court how to manage such affairs. When she had finished reading the note by the fast falling light, quick as thought, she had torn up the paper into tiny pieces and swallowed them. He must have told her to do so."

"He? Then do you really suppose that she can still think of him? Of that base and low adventurer who so shamelessly sold her love? It is inconceivable!"

"It is clear as daylight," returned Wulfhild emphatically. "Luitgard does not know of his worthlessness, so why should she have ceased to love him, when even I—I who know him through and through—have not yet succeeded in"—She broke off with a strangled sob, then fiercely dashed her hand over her eyes to scare away the tears whereof she was ashamed.

But Hedwig was not looking at Wulfhild, was not even aware of her emotion. All her powers of thought were just now concentrated upon her daughter, whom a lightning flash of revelation had shown to her hovering on the brink of a fearful precipice.

"It is time to speak," was all she said. "Bring Luitgard to me. To-night—at once."

When Luitgard, in compliance to her mother's message, opened the door and stood in her presence, her thoughts leapt back to that other evening, not yet two years since, when she had been summoned in like manner at a late hour, and had

entered the room, pale and frightened, not knowing what fresh decree, admonition, or punishment, here awaited her. That evening had been the beginning of it all, she told herself; from that moment forth her life had got into a different groove, and the stone set rolling, that by successive, ever accelerated leaps and bounds, had led down to the present day. And now it was the end, the final scene of her life at Pfeilhofen, that was about to be played out; for by this time to-morrow she would be far away out of reach of pursuit.

But it was no longer the timid, shrinking girl of former years that now stood before Hedwig; although so potent is the latent and unconscious power of association, that an involuntary shudder had run over her frame on first meeting her mother's eye. It was a proud and hard woman that Hedwig saw before her now, who gave her back glance for glance with steadfast animosity, and who did not even quail or start, as with pitiless directness Hedwig informed her that her clandestine intrigue was discovered, as that she was about to bring shame and dishonour upon the family name.

Rather, on the contrary, did Luitgard seem to gather strength and power of resistance from the outspoken accusation, as scornfully she flung back the very words into her accuser's teeth.

"Dishonour! And what of that?" she cynically inquired. "Pray what has honour done for me, that I should prize it so highly? If that be called honour which has made you sell your child to an unloved husband, which made you part me from the man I love by tricks and falsehoods, then I will have none of it."

"Luitgard, you are raving! You do not know"—

But she fiercely interrupted.

"I know quite enough. I know that you have never loved me—that you have almost hated me, your daughter, for being alive instead of Kunibert. You cannot deny it?"

Then, as no answer came, she went on in growing excitement, impelled to speak, without power to be silent, scarcely yet marvelling at her own boldness—

"What was it to you that I was miserable—so wretched that, had I only had the courage, I would have thrown myself down from the Herons' Tower, as Leonora did, on the eve of my wedding-day? But it suited you to sacrifice me in order to revive the name of Pfeilhofen, and he—he, of course, accepted the bargain because it made him a rich man. No one asked my consent, no one cared whether I was happy or not. I was merely a bale of goods and chattels to be bartered between two dealers; sacrificed to family pride and grasping covetousness. And that is what you call honour!"

Here Luitgard suddenly checked the flow of words, asking herself wonderingly whether it were indeed she, Luitgard Pfeilhofen, that was daring thus to brave the mother at whose slightest word and glance she had been wont to tremble? It almost seemed to her as though someone else, some unknown spirit, was speaking from out of the depths of her captive soul, words and phrases whereof she had neither knowledge nor control.

And Hedwig, what curious transformation had come over her, as she now sat immovable in her chair, but for the convulsive working of the bloodless lips and a slight tremulous motion in the wasted fingers clasped tightly together? Then all at once, with a deep painful breath, that seemed to mark the crisis of some great, some stupendous resolve, of some supreme victory gained over herself, she said in a voice that was not her usual voice—

"You are mistaken, Luitgard. It is not all as you think. You do not know the truth—you were never to have known it. But now, since there is no other way"—She checked herself with a bitter sigh, as though even now doubtful of her own strength to carry out her resolve, to lower herself before her own unloved and unloving daughter, to the point of revealing her share in the suppression of Eberhard's will. But this weakness was only momentary. Hedwig was not the woman to turn back half way before any goal she had set herself to reach, however hard, however thorny the path that

led to it. All her life she had been accustomed to meet obstacles and overthrow them, and in this last hardest battle with herself, she would be no coward.

"Bring me the mahogany desk that stands on my dressing-table," she said in her old hard voice, as she proceeded deliberately to detach the bunch of keys that hung from her silver chatelaine. She was now sitting upright again, and her eye had regained its former frosty brilliancy and decision.

Midnight found Luitgard still in her mother's room, pale and broken, from the crushing effect of the revelations that had taken place within the last hour.

She knew now that she was penniless, that Pfeilhofen had all along belonged to her cousin and husband, Gastone Frecciacorte, and the signification of much that had puzzled her with regard to her hastily arranged marriage and her parent's conduct was now made clear. It was as though she had for long been walking in a dark, tortuous labyrinth, into which bright and searching daylight had suddenly been shed. But the light was at first too blinding, too overwhelming, to be realised. Full comprehension could only come by degrees, when her numbed and stupefied mind was able to connect and piece together all the intricate meshes of the sorely tangled web that had been woven round her young unsuspecting life.

And just now the revelation of Eberhard's will and all that it implied paled away into insignificance, by the side of another discovery, more acutely personal, more deeply poignant in its effects upon her.

Delius was false! Delius was worthless! Delius, her bright fairy prince, to whom she had looked up as the impersonification of all that was fair and beautiful, a being to be loved, adored, and implicitly obeyed,—he to whom she had been about to sacrifice fortune, position, and honour, believing the world to be well lost for love of him,—he had done this base and treacherous thing; had bartered her love and her love tokens for sordid gold, and even while feigning the

most ardent attachment, had all along been pledged to another, whom he had basely forsaken.

"It is not true! It is false!" not only her lips but her very soul had cried out at her mother's first words. "You have deceived me before. You are deceiving me again!"

But Hedwig, now again completely mistress of the situation, had merely smiled with pitiless irony as she placed before her daughter's eyes the manifold irrefutable proofs of her lover's ignominy, to culminate in that document which a year ago he had been obliged to write and sign in the presence of those two women who had unmasked him, and which ran as follows:—

"I here acknowledge to having received the sum of five thousand thalers in German gold from the noble Countess Hedwig Pfeilhofen as price of a note and a lock of hair obtained from her daughter, Countess Luitgard Pfeilhofen; and I hereby pledge myself never again to approach or molest the said Countess Luitgard Pfeilhofen, under pain of legal punishment, to which I am aware that I have made myself liable by my previous conduct.

(Signed) HIPPOLYT MARLIN.

"Witnessed by

"HEDWIG VON PFEILHOFEN and

"WULFHILD VON WINKLERIED."

The reading of this document could not fail to bring home conviction to Luitgard's mind at last, and along with conviction there came a great repulsion, a sudden sickening of the soul, of her whole being; making her recoil in horror from the man to whom she had nearly fallen a prey. All her innate pride of birth, the fastidious self-respecting dignity, of a long line of blue-blooded ancestors, came to lend her their support at this moment of supreme humiliation. She was no longer a broken-hearted girl bewailing the lover who had betrayed her, but a proud, aristocratic woman, who could feel only contempt and disgust for the wiles of a base adventurer.

When, at the end of this agitating and protracted interview, mother and daughter had parted for the night, Hedwig said to Luitgard—

“At nine o'clock to-morrow morning, you say, he was to have met you at the Herons' Tower. He will wait in vain. But in order that our premises may be relieved from his presence as speedily as possible, it would perhaps be advisable to send Bitterbalg to await him there and deliver your message of dismissal.”

But Luitgard had thrown back her head with a proud gesture.

“No, mother; I shall go myself. It is from me, from my own lips, that he—this man—shall receive the answer he deserves.”

And Hedwig, as she looked at her daughter's white, set face, knew that she might be trusted to meet Delius alone and unsupported. The spell that had held her captive so long was now broken for ever.

CHAPTER XXXI

DESTRUCTION

WHEN Gastone had watched the disappearance of the travelling coach that was bearing away his wife from him farther and farther every minute, a great sense of desolation had fallen upon him.

Luitgard was gone. She had been at no pains to disguise from him how welcome a release it would be to her no longer to look upon his face and hear the sound of his voice, and the painful scene that had taken place between them but yesterday morning left small room for hope that time might have a softening influence upon her feelings. How could she ever willingly return to a husband whom she had not only disliked all along—for this seemed too despairingly clear to his mind—but who had moreover so far forgotten himself as to use violence towards that frail and delicate creature whom he had sworn to cherish and protect? Bitterly he upbraided himself for that moment's unbridled passion, when, goaded to brief madness by the conjured-up vision of a rival in his wife's affections, he had crushed her delicate wrist between his harsh fingers. But the question once raised would not be silenced. Who was he? What was he? This other man, to whom Luitgard had written those impassioned, delirious words, which he in his former simplicity had believed to have been addressed to himself? The more he pondered over this riddle, the more remote did all explanation seem to be. It could not be anyone here in the capital, he told himself, since that note had been written last year, before their marriage, before Luitgard had ever set foot in Buxenburg. And at Pfeilhofen

she knew no one, saw no one, had lived an almost cloistered life.

The first two days after Luitgard's departure were spent by Gastone in wandering about restlessly from room to room, as though endeavouring to convince himself of the fact of her absence, and reconcile himself to the new sense of solitude. Every room seemed imbued with her presence, each single article of furniture recalled some movement, some gesture of hers. The walls seemed strangely dead and silent, now that they no longer gave back the echoes of her sweet low voice; and the large gaping mirrors looked dull and expressionless as stagnant water pools whence the sunshine has departed, now that they no longer reflected her exquisite pale face.

Upon the second day after Luitgard's departure this hungry craving, this hot longing to look again upon her face, grew almost unbearably strong. If at least he had a picture of his wife, a painted portrait, to keep him company in the empty rooms, he would not have felt so utterly desolate and alone; and then, with a flash of almost joyful recollection, he remembered the statue of Luitgard whereupon Marlin the sculptor was engaged for the grand-duke's Temple of the Houris. It must be nearly completed by this time. Yes, he would go there at once—would look upon the marble Luitgard, since the living one was out of reach.

As Gastone drew near the door of Marlin's *atelier* the sound of loud and violent hammering fell upon his ear, and, entering unannounced, he beheld a singular spectacle. There, in the centre of the room, stood the old sculptor, wielding a heavy hammer wherewith he was demolishing a marble statue before him, mercilessly annihilating the classical features and symmetrical limbs which he himself so lovingly had formed, and apparently finding a kind of fierce enjoyment as the angry hammer strokes drew sparks from the marble chips, which were falling in showers all around him, to strew the ground with unsightly fragments.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Gastone, in profoundest astonishment.

The old sculptor, turning abruptly, showed him a face fixed and motionless as a dead mask, which, surrounded by the wildly tousled white hair and beard, appeared as though framed in a distorted silver halo. Only the eyes seemed alive, as they glowed with a sinister light in their cavernous sockets.

"I am destroying the image of a traitor," he said in a dull, apathetic voice. "I want to forget his face—never more to be reminded of him."

"But why? Why do you do this? What has happened? Of whom is this image you are breaking?" questioned Gastone, still bewildered, and inclined to believe in a momentary outbreak of madness.

"It is the portrait of Phebus—my boy whom I loved so dearly. Phebus—that is what I used to call him, because of his bright, sunshiny beauty," he said brokenly. "I loved him so dearly that I would have given my life for him. But he is a traitor—a traitor! Ah!" he exclaimed wildly, all his painfully assumed composure suddenly giving way. "That it should have come to this! He was young, and I was old. But a few years longer, and it would all have belonged to him at any rate. Surely he might have waited. And had he asked for money, I would have given it freely. But to rob me—to take it from me while I slept so deeply, that I heard nothing!"

"Who is Phebus? What is he?" questioned the marchese, who did not remember ever having heard the name before. And then he learned the facts about the sculptor's adopted son, called by some Phebus, by others Hippolyt, or Delius, who in the preceding night had broken open and robbed his benefactor's money chest, after having previously drugged his evening ale with a heavy sleeping-potion.

"Who could have believed it, that within a face and form of such surpassing beauty a black heart and the soul of a demon could dwell? You have never seen him, did you say, noble count? I will show him to you. The statue of Phebus, the best of all, is destroyed," he

said grimly, gazing down on the scattered fragments. "But look here, you can see him over and over again. There is the copy of the statue I made of him as the laughing faun. Yonder he lies as the sleeping Endymion; and there as Paris with the golden apple; and here, the very first one, as Apollo killing the serpent Python. Did you ever see beauty to be compared to this? That is why his power was so unlimited—why every one was so slow to suspect him of evil. Not a woman could look in his face without losing her heart to him; and not one but would follow him to the end of the world as blindly as do those poor helpless serpents which he loves to play with and subdue. And there must be a woman at the bottom of his present crime, I'll warrant; some unfortunate creature whom he has deluded with promises of eternal fidelity, and whom he will, of course, forsake again, as he has done the others."

"You think—you suppose—that he must have someone—some guilty partner—in his flight?" asked Gastone slowly.

"I am convinced of it. I know the symptoms. I have seen them so often before. But as for guilt, did I not tell you that all women are like wax in his hands? Such beauty as his, is powerful as a law of nature, which cannot be opposed or resisted. Look at his images and say yourself whether any woman could have a chance against him."

And Gastone looked long and earnestly at the statue of the laughing faun, of the sleeping Endymion, of Paris and of Apollo, and from them back again to the unfinished statue of Luitgard crowned with stars and roses in her character of Queen of Beauty. In those stony eyes, those silent marble lips, he thought to read the answer to the perplexing riddle that had been troubling him. He now knew, or believed that he knew, the motive of Luitgard's hasty departure.

Marlin meanwhile had resumed the hammer, and was now at work upon the laughing faun, whose head, struck

off at one clean stroke, had rolled to the ground close to the visitor's feet, whence it seemed to leer up mockingly into his face.

To Gastone, as he turned away and left the house, pursued by the sound of this wholesale destruction, it appeared as if those heavy blows were being dealt out, not upon lifeless marble, but upon his own bruised and broken heart.

CHAPTER XXXII

EBERHARD'S WILL EXPLAINED

FOR the last time Luitgard had gone forth to meet Delius at the Herons' Tower. There was no sense of fear or hesitation about her as she walked down the chestnut avenue with firm unwavering step, and head held proudly erect. She never paused or looked back; for her eyes, like her mind, were fixed steadily ahead upon the object of her present errand. Every nerve was strung up, every sense bent forward in one single direction, to the exclusion of all other outward impressions.

Had it not been so, she would probably have been aware of a travelling carriage which reached the castle from another direction shortly after her departure, the steaming horses and mud-bespattered vehicle betraying the fast and furious pace at which it had been driven.

Almost before the carriage had come to a standstill, Gastone had sprung out.

"Where is Countess Luitgard? Where is my wife? Is she here?" he exclaimed without preamble, on meeting Bitterbalg on the threshold.

"Yes, yes, her graciousness is here," returned Bitterbalg, considerably startled at his wild disordered appearance.

"Thank God, I am still in time!" he muttered hoarsely. Then aloud, "Take me to her directly. Where shall I find her?"

Bitterbalg coughed discreetly in order to gain time. He scented a domestic crisis of some kind, and was extremely doubtful as to the expediency of permitting a meeting

between husband and wife, without distinct orders on the subject from the countess.

"It is not for me to say where her graciousness Countess Luitgard may be just now precisely. May be that she has not yet completed her toilet, or perhaps it has pleased her graciousness to step out on to the terrace in order to pluck a bunch of lilac or a sprig of hawthorn. The flowers are exceptionally fine this year. How should I know for certain where Countess Luitgard may be just now? She will come presently, no doubt. But in the meantime, if your excellency would deign to partake of some refreshment after the fatigues of travel? A glass of mead, or maybe a tankard of ale with a slice of"—

But Gastone did not even seem to be listening, as he interrupted impatiently—

"Then it is to Countess Hedwig I must go. She shall tell me the truth, and I too have much to say that she must listen to."

And without pausing for permission, he strode up the staircase and entered Hedwig's sick chamber unannounced.

Hedwig was extended upon a couch near the open window. The interview with Luitgard on the previous evening had exhausted all her strength, and she had been unable to close an eye in slumber.

Her mere aspect was sufficient to have aroused compassion in the hardest heart; but Gastone felt none, as in bitter, upbraiding words he called her to account for her past dissimulation. Why had she sold her daughter against her will? What right had she to force upon him an unloving and reluctant wife? Wherefore all this pitiable comedy, which had only brought misery to all concerned? Such were the questions which hot and fiercely poured from his lips.

The shock of this unexpected attack restored to Hedwig, even weak and suffering as she was, some portion of that energy that never deserted her in any great crisis. That Luitgard should have reproached her in bitter, stinging words, for what had been done was conceivable, almost excusable,

Hedwig told herself; for a keen sense of justice was not among the qualities she lacked. But that he—Gastone—should turn upon her, was well-nigh incredible, for whoever else might have suffered, he alone had surely reaped unalloyed advantage from the arrangement! A year ago he had been a penniless courtier; now he was rich and the husband of a woman whom he passionately loved, and it was from her hand that both these gifts had come to him.

"Why did I force Luitgard to become your wife?" she said, repeating his last question. "It was for your sake I did this thing—in order that justice might be done to you, and this was the only way."

"I do not understand," said Gastone, after a moment's perplexed silence.

"You will understand presently," retorted Hedwig, turning to the mahogany desk which still stood on the table alongside where Luitgard had placed it yesterday.

It was all a repetition of the previous scene, only deepened and intensified—the pain more acute—the sense of shame, as of fear, more alive and poignant. Small wonder if Hedwig's wasted fingers trembled as they turned the key in the lock, if her breath came in short painful gasps, as with averted eyes she handed to her cousin the folded-up piece of parchment whereon was indited the will of their common great-grandfather, so fraudulently suppressed by those against whose interest it protested.

There was a long silence between them, so long that to Hedwig, sitting in her arm-chair with bowed head and convulsively clasped hands, it appeared as though she had lived through years of this torturing suspense, with no sound in the room but the intolerable hammering of her heart within her breast, and the faint rustle of the stiff parchment held between Gastone's fingers. Like a criminal awaiting a deserved condemnation, she waited thus, not daring to break the silence by word or movement, not knowing what to expect—what outbreak of rightful fury, even of violence.

When at last he spoke, it came as a complete surprise.

"This is, I see, a transcription of the will of Eberhard, my great-grandfather. I was not aware that such a copy existed," he said, looking across at her with calm, steady eyes, wherein only a very faint degree of surprise was mirrored.

"Then you knew—you were aware—of this will?" stammered Hedwig, for once in danger of losing her presence of mind.

"The original is in my possession, and as it is signed by two witnesses—which is not the case here—my document must, I presume, be the legal and genuine one, and this merely the draft or rough-cast. But the terms are identical, or nearly so."

"But the meaning"—gasped Hedwig, feeling more and more as though all firm ground were slipping away from under her feet. "Do you understand all that it implies? That the property was bequeathed to Konrad, and not to Wilibald, and that consequently you"—

"That consequently I might be regarded as the legal inheritor of Pfeilhofen," completed Gastone, still unperturbed. "Yes, that is what this piece of parchment implies, and no doubt the law would say the same. But we—we have never regarded it in that light. When Konrad in flying the country took with him the will which his father had given him to keep, shortly before his death, it was certainly not with any intention of ever claiming an inheritance which he believed himself to have forfeited by his fratricide. Neither did my father ever harbour any such intention, so far as I am aware."

"And you, my cousin," questioned Hedwig, beginning to regain some degree of mental lucidity, "did you never regret your lost inheritance? Never consider the possibility of regaining it by publishing the will and going to law?"

Gastone shook his head with calm resolution.

"It was not for me to do so. The decision was taken long before I came into the world, by those who had the right to do so. Was I entitled to overthrow and condemn what my

father and grandfather had considered their duty? But as to regret, well, perhaps that was only human. In former days, indeed, I had never thought much about it. Germany seemed so far off, and Konrad's inheritance such an unreal and visionary thing, that it scarcely affected me. It was only when I came here into this country that I began to realise the change, the difference it had made."

"And yet you kept silence even then? Oh, why did you not speak?"

"Why should I have spoken, rather? I did not know, could not guess, that you had any knowledge of Eberhard's will, and without that will, according to the law of primogeniture, your husband was undoubtedly entitled to consider himself the legal heir. Why then should I have disturbed his mind and yours by raising doubts and revealing what he never need have known?"

Hedwig was gazing at her kinsman with wondering eyes, wherein relief and shame were struggling for the mastery. This simple dignity, this unsophisticated frankness in disposing of the vexed and tortuous question over which their lives had been racked and fretted for well-nigh two years, compelled the admiration, the respect, almost the homage of this woman, who had shown herself to be such a mistress of cunning, such an expert in successful intrigue and diplomacy. She was experiencing the sensation of someone who, awakening from a troubled nightmare-dream of strife and bloodshed, finds himself among calm, familiar surroundings. All the anguish, the tortures, the remorse of these last two years had then been unnecessary; and as she recalled the many painful and agitating controversies with Othmar upon this subject, a movement of tardy compassion for the sufferings that had overwhelmed his last days rose up within her.

"My poor Othmar! If he had but known! If you had but spoken at the time! He need not have suffered so terribly!"

"Suffered?" said Gastone interrogatively. His mind was travelling very slowly, and he was yet miles from comprehend-

ing, or realising, all the wheels within wheels that had been revolving during these past two years. "He suffered because of this? Because he supposed that I— Ah! And for this it was that you forced Luitgard to become my wife! In order to give me back what you thought was my due! For this it was that you committed this crime! And now retribution has come upon you, and upon me as well. Ah, Countess Hedwig, you have much to answer for before God and before me. Do you imagine I shall forgive you for having driven your daughter to an act of madness, and destroyed my life?"

He had sprung to his feet, and was standing over her, pale and threatening. All the rage, the hot anger which the thought of his lost inheritance had failed to arouse in him, was now flashing in his eyes, quivering in his voice.

"But nothing is wrecked, nothing is destroyed," faltered Hedwig, shrinking beneath his glance, and drawing her shawl together, as though the ague-like shiver that ran over her frame, was due to the mild April breeze wafted in through the open window.

Gastone gave a hard, unmirthful laugh.

"Nothing wrecked! You call that nothing, when I tell you that she, Luitgard, my wife, has gone off with that other man."

"What other man?" questioned Hedwig, with a swift piercing glance. Until this moment she had nourished the hope that the existence of Delius was unknown to Gastone.

"Who else but that fellow with the low forehead and the Grecian nose?—The laughing faun, the sleeping Endymion, the broken Phebus—curse them all together!" And here Gastone rounded off his sentence with a fluent Italian oath whose vigour was unmistakable, even though the isolated words conveyed no meaning to Hedwig's ear. "That is the man who has gone away with your daughter! You cannot deny it? And it is you—you who have driven her to this!"

"Yes, she has gone to meet this man—Delius or Hippolyt he calls himself," retorted Hedwig, seeing further concealment

to be impossible, and recognising that the present desperate situation could only be retrieved by perfect truth and a full disclosure. "Yes, she has gone to meet him; but it is not as you think. Go there yourself—listen with your own ears and see with your own eyes, if you will not believe me. Go, I tell you. You will find Luitgard at the Herons' Tower!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE GAME PLAYED OUT

THERE were violets growing again round the Herons' Tower, violets as deeply purple, as delicately fragrant as the many previous generations of flowers that had sprouted here, to spread an enamelled carpet beneath the feet of the old moss-grown statues and fill the air with their overpowering perfume; as bright and as sweet as those same violets that were growing here two years ago, when Luitgard had first set eyes on Delius lying in the grass, and had then and there fallen under his charm.

The actors in to-day's scene were the same as then, and the two years that had passed over their heads, had but brought to perfection the beauty of each. But it was no lovers' meeting that took place to-day; it was a scene played out with icy disdain on the one side, with brutal effrontery on the other. The revulsion of feeling that had taken place in Luitgard since last night, had been so violent and complete, that she now marvelled at herself for ever having found beauty in this man, whose moral deformity had been laid bare. It was as though the bright flowers and waving grasses masking the edge of some frightful abyss had been suddenly removed, to reveal the yawning chasm in all its native hideousness.

The door of the tower stood wide open, and the two voices raised in fierce altercation were plainly audible to Gastone's ear as he reached the spot. Neither Luitgard nor Delius had any thought of speaking in hushed or lowered accents. What need of concealment, of taking precautions now? Each

knew the game to be played out. Delius was aware that the prize he had been pursuing had once more and finally escaped him ; and Luitgard, acutely conscious that the love drama of her young life had resolved itself into a pitiful farce, had no other desire but to reach the conclusion, the final drop of the curtain, as speedily as possible.

"You try to deceive both yourself and me, Luita, when you tell me that your love is dead," Delius was saying, as Gastone, with quite unnecessary precaution, concealed himself behind one of the ivied statues on the steps. "It cannot be—it is impossible. A mere nervous delusion on your part. Come with me, and you shall learn the true meaning of love, such love as you never have known or dreamed of. There in my own bright country we shall live in orange groves, and, basking in perpetual sunshine, forget all these cold, stiff people among whom your life has been spent."

"Do not dare to approach me," exclaimed Luitgard, recoiling from him in unmistakable horror. "Have I not yet spoken plainly enough? Have you not understood that I loathe you, that the mere touch of your hand makes me shudder as would do the contact of one of the serpents that live in these walls? Do you believe me now at last, when I tell you that it is you who are mad, still to believe that I ever willingly would follow you?"

Delius gave a coarse laugh, which changed and distorted all the beauty of his face into something ugly and venomous.

"And pray has it never occurred to you, my haughty lady, that you have now no choice left in the matter but to go with me? Do you suppose that his excellency, your high and mighty husband, will be disposed to condone and overlook these little passages between us? You will never get him to believe that it was but harmless child's play, after all ; that I was fool enough not to pluck the flower that was there all ready to my hand."

A loud rustle in the ivy alongside might have warned the two speakers that they were not alone. For a moment Gastone's hand had sprung to the hilt of his sword, but

restraining himself with a powerful effort, he again stood still as Delius proceeded.

"Or do you foolishly hope, perhaps, to go on hoodwinking him as hitherto, and keeping all these things from his knowledge? Vain, delusive hope! You are simple indeed if you can entertain it for a moment. A thousand facts there are to incriminate you in his eyes. How will you explain the loss of your jewels? Or do you imagine that I am going to be weak enough to restore them to you now that you have changed your mind forsooth? You see now how vain it is to strive against me, Luita."

"Keep the jewels," retorted Luitgard scornfully; "but their possession will give you no hold over me."

"You intend to make a clean breast of it, perhaps? To throw yourself on his mercy and sue for forgiveness?" went on Delius tauntingly. "Well, I wish you success; but he does not look the man to forgive and forget."

"You are mistaken," said Luitgard, now white to the lips. "I shall neither ask nor expect forgiveness from him, for I know that I do not deserve it; but at least he shall be no longer troubled with an unworthy wife. After all, it is but justice that I should suffer for the degradation of ever having loved such a wretch as you."

And turning abruptly, after a last glance of withering contempt, Luitgard passed out through the open door and began to ascend the steep flight of steps that led to the summit of the Herons' Tower.

Yes, this was the only way remaining, she told herself, the sole possible exit from this hideous labyrinth of misery wherein she had become involved beyond redemption. Her coming into the world had been a mistake all along. She had known it dimly since childhood; but it was only now, within the last hour, that this conviction had come home to her as a fixed and hopeless fact.

Her eye was quite steady, her step firm and unflinching, as she now approached the edge of the parapet; for there is no room for fear in a heart wherein hope is irrevocably extinguished.

And when suddenly, just at the moment she believed to be her last one in life, Luitgard felt her arm firmly clutched from her rear, angry impatience at an unwelcome interruption was her only conscious sensation.

"Leave me! leave me!" she cried fiercely. "I tell you that all your persuasions are useless. Death is a thousand times preferable to the degradation of your love! It is you who have made the world so hideous to me that I no longer care to stay."

And then, as she turned to confront her captor, with a great throb of surprise and of fear, Luitgard saw that it was not Delius but Gastone, who was holding her arm fast imprisoned with both hands.

"Leave me!" she cried, more faintly this time. "It is better so, better for us both. You do not know"—And she struggled in his grasp, trembling and fluttering like a bird caught in the fowler's net.

She had closed her eyes, not daring to meet his gaze, wherein there could only be anger and condemnation. But she could not shut out the sound of the voice, deep and tender, that was murmuring into her ear—

"I know everything—everything; and that is why I am here to fetch you, to save you. Did I not tell you that I would keep my wife, and that neither man nor devil should part us? Luitgard, my poor child! my poor wounded bird! will you not intrust yourself to your husband, who only asks leave to keep you as his most priceless treasure, and defend you against the whole world?"

She opened her eyes, and still with wondering incredulity looked up into his as they stood thus together on the brink of that awful gap in the castellated wall. What she read there was more than sufficient to silence for ever all doubt, all hesitation, all fear.

With a long, sobbing sigh of helpless surrender, Luitgard suffered herself to fall into her husband's arms.

Half an hour later, Delius was still standing at the tower entrance, a heavy scowl upon his brow, and an ugly sneer

on his lips as he watched the two figures of Luitgard and Gastone disappearing amongst the trees. Half leading, half supporting, he was holding her tightly encircled with his protecting arm, with the masterful tenderness of lawful possession. His own existence was forgotten, it seemed, by these two ; for as they had descended the ruined staircase just now, she clinging to his arm with confiding weakness, neither of them had vouchsafed a glance to where he was standing, scarcely concealed from view.

Mortification and disappointment, were the prevalent feelings in his mind just at first ; for although his passion for Luitgard had lost much of its former strength and ardour, the thought of her beauty, now lost to him for ever, was yet vivid enough to produce a feeling of bitter regret ; along with a fierce longing to be revenged upon the man who, as he told himself, had wrested the prize from his hand at the very moment of victory.

But Delius was of too eminently practical a nature ever to waste much time in lamenting over spilt milk, and his vivid fantasy was always tempered and regulated by material considerations.

So in the present crisis. After a few muttered curses and imprecations, he began rapidly to review the situation, and to consider that, after all, Fortune might have treated him with even greater harshness than she had done. True, Luitgard had now passed out of his life ; but did not the world contain many other fair women who would be willing to follow where he listed, and share with him the fruits of those goods which his ingenuity had secured ? A double harvest it was, for in addition to the contents of Marlin's safe, were there not Luitgard's jewels, that valuable set of diamonds and sapphires, which with such withering scorn she had abandoned to his covetousness ?

His arrangements for their flight had all been carefully prepared, and the carriage that was to have borne him and Luitgard far away out of reach of pursuit, was even now waiting for them at a solitary cross-road scarce half an hour's

distance through the forest; while the jewels, by his deft fingers detached from their setting, were securely packed away in the broad leather knapsack that he always carried about with him on similar wanderings.

It was seldom that Delius laid aside this bag, his inseparable companion by day and by night; but this morning, on reaching the place of rendezvous, he had taken it off in order to pierce some additional holes in the strap that secured the side pockets. While still engaged upon this work, he had caught sight of Luitgard's white dress shining through the trees, and had risen to meet her, leaving the bag and its contents lying in the grass at the edge of the water.

Delius looked at his watch, and saw that it was just ten o'clock—the hour when he had expected to reach the carriage with his companion. He must not tarry longer, must make haste to quit these premises, for at any moment the alarm might be given. The marchese might send half a dozen men to secure him, or even return himself to wreak vengeance upon him. It would not take him five minutes to gain that point in the park wall which so many times already he had scaled.

The knapsack was still lying where Delius had placed it, but as he reached the spot, and hastily bent down to take it up, too late he became aware of an unexpected danger.

The smooth leather surface, reflecting back the rays of the warm April sun, streaming down unchecked at this particular spot, had seemed apparently to offer a congenial bed to a pair of snakes, which, still heavy and torpid from their winter slumber, had but recently crept out from their hiding-places. They too, no doubt, were enjoying the exquisite spring day in their own peculiar fashion, as with speckled bodies affectionately entwined they voluptuously reclined on this luxurious couch, placed here as though for their exclusive benefit, and so vastly superior to the cheerless stone steps, or cold, dewy grass alongside.

When the smaller serpent, raising its head, had so unexpectedly struck out towards the insolent intruder that was

venturing to disturb its sweet conjugal privacy, Delius had been quick to realise the danger, and had drawn back hastily, even before, with a short rustle, the reptile had glided off to disappear in the grass. But the other and larger serpent stood its ground, and did not seem inclined to evacuate the position, as, rearing its bright spotted neck aloft, it hissed out malignantly in his direction.

To remove it forcibly or kick it away, in the reptile's state of visible irritation, was clearly impossible. He must count upon magnetism as the surest way of rendering it harmless; and, though inwardly chafing at the delay thus entailed, he fixed his eyes firmly upon the serpent, while, drawing out from his pocket the wooden flageolet, he began softly to play the snake-charmer's air, that melody which had so often won him the applause of crowded arenas.

Never yet before had the melody missed its effect, nor did it do so now, for by degrees the serpent ceased to hiss and dart with its venomous forked tongue, but, subdued and fascinated, swayed gently to and fro, as though to mark the cadence of the melody. Still it would not be safe to lay hold of it yet; so Delius went on playing, although presently he became aware of an unusual sensation about his mouth and throat. It was almost as if the mere act of playing had suddenly become difficult and painful. What could it be? he wondered. And his right arm too, how stiff and heavy it felt! He must have strained it somehow, without noticing. It could be nothing else, surely? That other serpent had not had time to strike before he had withdrawn his hand? Impossible! The mere idea was absurd. He must go on playing—yes, playing. That was the only thing to be done. But why did his tongue feel so large and heavy? He had never known before that the flageolet was so difficult an instrument to play.

He tried to laugh aloud, but the sound refused to come. The serpent was now completely subdued, and offered no resistance as he took up the limp, loose coils in his hand to drop it over the edge of the pond into a clump of thick-growing rushes.

Nothing now prevented him from taking up the knapsack and quitting the premises as speedily as possible ; but instead of this, Delius, whose complexion was fast turning to a livid pallor, staggered for a moment, and then sat down rather suddenly in the grass.

He held up the wrist of his right hand to look at a small red spot surrounded by a narrow bluish line just under the pulse, wondering how it had come there, and whether it could be a scratch or the bite of some insect?

And ten minutes later he was still sitting there, and the narrow blue line had now widened and deepened in hue.

But Delius was not looking at his wrist ; he was staring at the brown leather knapsack, and trying to recollect why he had come here. With his cramped and swollen fingers he laid hold of the bag and drew out a packet carefully tied up in several wrappings of paper. After some painful effort the string was loosened and the contents came pouring out—a brilliant cascade of sparkling gems, falling over hands and knees and into the grass all around him.

With a foolish, vacant smile he stared down at a large blue sapphire in the palm of his hand.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE EVIL GENIUS DISLODGED

MEANWHILE, Wulfhild had been waiting under a tree at the other side of the water. She had taken up her position here, not far from the prostrate fir trunk, which, as she well knew, formed the only means of access to the island. In order to leave the park, Delius must therefore necessarily pass over this natural bridge. There was no other way, and she was determined that he should listen to what she had to say. It was for that purpose that she had come here—for that and for something else; and with a strange glitter in her dark eyes Wulfhild's hand stealthily fingered the jewelled handle of the little hunting knife concealed in her bosom. She had placed it there this morning not wholly clear as to her own intentions with regard to it. It is possible that the dagger may originally have been intended for Luitgard, should there be no other means of curing her infatuation for Hippolyt, or Delius, as she called him. But now Luitgard required no dagger, since fully an hour ago Wulfhild had witnessed her return to the castle leaning on her husband's arm.

Still Delius did not come. What did it mean? Could he possibly have eluded her vigilance and escaped by some other path? And as this idea flashed across Wulfhild's mind, the employment of the dagger again appeared in the light of an urgent necessity.

Weary of this long, fruitless waiting, Wulfhild at last crossed over the pine stem and walked round to the other side of the tower, where she presently found what she sought. There Delius was lying on the flower-bespangled grass, where dewdrops

vying in lustre with the lavishly scattered diamonds, and sapphires as blue as the rank-growing violets, seemed to have joined together in order to weave a bright, fantastic garland round the perfect features and faultless figure of the dead youth.

It was inside the Herons' Tower, upon Zelmira's couch—there, where he so often had sat by Luitgard's side,—that Delius was laid out for burial; and here, during the two days that intervened before the body was consigned to its last resting-place, Wulfhild kept watch in silent grief, undeterred by the fear of serpents, and jealously claiming her right to stay here alone, and unsupported, although no one had thought of disputing or sharing this dubious privilege. There were none left to mourn for this man, who had been loved so often and so passionately because of the fair outside shell that had concealed so worthless a soul.

And to Wulfhild, even in the midst of her affliction, as she looked upon this face—as white, as immovable, yet in beauty so far surpassing the many marble statues to which he had stood model—there was unacknowledged solace in the thought that never again more would his fair, false face have power to enthrall other women. He belonged now to her and to her alone, she told herself with fierce satisfaction, as for the last time she pressed her warm living lips upon his cold ones. It would not be in the power of any other Diana to reawaken her sleeping Endymion. And when silently and stealthily, without pomp or ceremony, on the third day after his death, the body, placed in a plain deal coffin, was carried on the shoulders of four peasants, to the nearest village cemetery, there to be consigned to a nameless grave, Wulfhild alone, as the chief and only mourner, walked close behind the bier.

But in the night succeeding the funeral, the denizens of Castle Pfeilhofen were roused from sleep by loud cries of "Fire! fire! the Herons' Tower is burning!" And, looking out affrighted into the darkness, they could see the sky

illuminated by a broad crimson streak just over the tree-tops across the park.

When Luitgard, having hastily dressed, reached the spot along with her husband, they found a large crowd already assembled round the pond. All the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, every one of the Pfeilhofen retainers, had turned out in order to assist in subduing and quenching the flames.

How it had originated no one could say, and conjecture only pointed to the possibility of one of the candles that had burned round the corpse having been overlooked when the coffin was carried out, and the door hastily locked. But the greater part of the building might yet be saved, it was thought, for there was water in plenty all round, and the fire had not yet reached the upper part of the tower. Numerous buckets were being hastily filled and refilled under Bitterbalg's directions, to be cast splashing and hissing into the leaping flames, while dozens of other arms, holding long pine-tree branches saturated with water, were beating down the showers of sparks as fast as they rose up. All was bustle, life, and activity; everyone was eager to lend his assistance in subduing the fire.

But Gastone's voice, calm and authoritative, suddenly checked all this animated movement.

"Halt!" he cried, loud enough to be heard by the whole assembled crowd. "Let no man presume to meddle further. It is the hand of God Himself that has kindled this fire. Leave it to burn unhindered. The Herons' Tower has stood long enough."

And though unmixed wonder was expressed on many faces, not a voice was raised in murmur or protest. Instinctively all may have felt the presence of a master, who had here the right to command.

But Luitgard alone understood, and as she drew a little closer to her husband she murmured gratefully into his ear—

"Yes, you are right. The Herons' Tower has stood long enough. Its disappearance will be a gain rather than a loss to us."

For two whole days the tower continued to burn ; while, through the dense uprising smoke columns, the affrighted herons circled distressedly round and round their imperilled nests, uttering hoarse discordant cries of fear ; and the snakes, whose undisputed kingdom this place had been for well-nigh a century, now forced to evacuate their secret fastnesses, perished miserably writhing in the flames, or, seeking to escape, were struck down with sticks and stones, ere they had time to reach the edge of the pond.

On the morning of the third day there remained but a shapeless, and still faintly smoking mound of grey stones, to mark the spot where the Herons' Tower had stood.

The evil genius of the Pfeilhofen family, to whom popular tradition had assigned this abode, would now inevitably be obliged to seek other quarters.

CHAPTER XXXV

CONCLUSION

IT was on a sultry July afternoon that a much-heated and exhausted equerry, riding a foam-flecked steed, dashed through the Pfeilhofen gates at a headlong gallop, to draw up breathless before the castle, where he was instantly surrounded by a group of eager and excited persons all pressing forward to ask the same impatient questions—

“Which is it? Which is it? You have brought the news? Say quickly!”

More than a year had now passed since the events recorded in the preceding chapter, and during this year neither Luitgard nor her husband had revisited Castle Pfeilhofen. Immediately after the burning down of the Herons' Tower, Gastone had taken away his young wife, feeling the necessity of effacing by fresh scenes and new interests, the memory of the many painful impressions that clung about the place. It was unavoidable that the sufferings she had undergone should have left their mark upon a nature as delicately organised as was hers, and just as an earthquake will sometimes convulse the whole surface of a track of country, and annihilate vegetation, so too the psychic convulsions that Luitgard had experienced, seemed almost to have destroyed her youth, exhausted her capacity of enjoyment, and even deadened her power of loving. The miserable consciousness that the treasures of young love, the first freshness of maiden passion, irrevocably wasted upon an unworthy object, were no longer hers to bestow upon the man who would so fully have deserved them, weighed heavily upon her spirits for many weeks and

months, and there were still moments when she caught herself regretting that Gastone had been in time to save her from Leonora's fate.

She was like a frail, tempest-tossed flower that, even when surrounded by sunshine and warmth, finds it hard to rear its stricken head again. But warmth and sunshine did their work at last, as with infinite tenderness and almost superhuman patience Gastone won back his wife to life and happiness; and when at last there came to them the hope of another little being to cement their union, both felt that the dark shadow of the past was now indeed lifted from them.

When it was made known that Luitgard was about to become a mother, Hedwig was feverishly anxious that the child should be born at Pfeilhofen; but upon this point Gastone had been inflexible. For, although no open and acknowledged breach had taken place between them, he had not yet been able to forgive his mother-in-law for the part she had played in her daughter's life; and the conviction that Luitgard would never recover her health, morally and physically, by the side of that mother, was firmly inrooted within him.

So this woman, whose diseased and selfish grief, nourished at the expense of every other healthy and natural feeling, had wrought such harm and inflicted so much needless pain, was left alone to brood over the past; and had it not been for Wulfhild, who lingered on at Pfeilhofen in order to enjoy the dismal luxury of daily visiting the grave of her sleeping Endymion and covering it with flowers, her last days of life would indeed have been wretched and forlorn.

Visibly dying, and growing weaker every day, one hope alone seemed to have the power of keeping her from the grave. She could not die, she told herself; she must live to see Luitgard's child. Would it be a boy? A son to carry on the family name? Another Kunibert, sent to replace the one she had never ceased to mourn these many weary years? This was the question which she had asked herself night and morning, in bright days or dull, all through the winter weeks and months, and the long, dragging spring days. Will it be a boy?

She had been asking it again this sultry July afternoon a little while ago, before she had fallen asleep in the arm chair placed near the open window, through which the perfume of the lime-blossoms in the park, poured in sweet and heavy.

"Will it be a boy? Oh, will it be a boy?"

But though she knew it not, the answer had already come, as below in the courtyard the heated and exhausted rider, who on relays of horses had galloped all the way from the capital, was announcing that her graciousness, the high and noble Countess Luitgard von Pfeilhofen, had yesterday morning given birth to a fine healthy son.

"A boy! a boy! Hoorah! We have got a boy!" shouted Bitterbalg, running up the staircase as fast as his stiff old legs would carry him, while aloft he brandished the letter containing the news.

"A boy! Luitgard has got a son!" cried Wulfhild, meeting him in the passage and flinging wide open the door of Hedwig's chamber.

Then, as no answer came, she went up to the chair where the invalid still slumbered, to repeat in a louder key—

"Do you hear, Countess Hedwig? Luitgard has got. . . ."

The sentence was never finished, for a glance at the waxen face resting against the pillow, told Wulfhild that for Hedwig the news had come too late.

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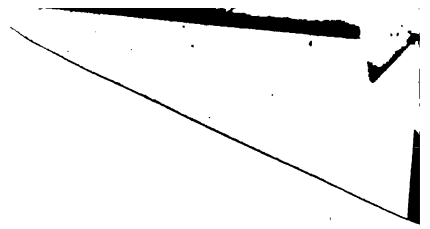
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